

CHESTERTON'S PARADOX ■ AIG'S GREAT ESCAPE ■ EUROPEAN DISUNION

MARCH 23, 2009

The American Conservative

Are you
now, or
have you
ever been,
an Arabist?

The hunting of Charles Freeman

REVOLT AGAINST THE ELITES

One of the more nauseating aspects of political discourse is when self-annointed elites like John Derbyshire attack the likes of Rush Limbaugh because they're uncomfortable with his tone ("How Radio Wrecks the Right," Feb. 23). Discussing the relative merits of highbrow vs. middlebrow and lowbrow chatter may give him an inflated sense of intellectual and moral superiority, but he's not fooling anyone. So let me make it simple: he is an elitist snob.

Derbyshire may have conservative sympathies, but he's not confident enough in his own ideology to stand up to liberals in his own profession. So he rails against intellectual superiors like Rush Limbaugh, Mark Levin, and to some extent, Sean Hannity because he has convinced himself that they make him look bad.

Their appeal spans the universe of conservatives, from bluebloods in the Hamptons to hayseeds in the Ozarks. But a lightweight like Derbyshire is ill-equipped to account for the least of his Republican brethren in the face of Marxist pseudo-intellectuals. Apparently, they make him look bad in front of Biff, Malibu Ken, and the rest of the Harvard crew team.

But his mimosa-drinking liberal friends have no practical experience operating a business, they have never had to pay taxes and make payroll. They've won life's lottery. They live off the labors of their ancestry and do not have to give the first consideration to what makes an economy work. Those hayseed Limbaugh listeners may not possess Derbyshire's vocabulary, but they run rings around him in the real world. He's looking down his nose at his real superiors. That makes him a coward. Rarely has the combination of ignorance and arrogance been packaged so elegantly as in your self-important article.

VINCENT LOUGHNANE

Via e-mail

LOW BROWBEATING

John Derbyshire, you are not a conservative and have no idea what you are talking about when it comes to conservatism. Just how much did you get in the stimulus bill to lead you to write such dribble? Blaming Limbaugh and Hannity for the mess Republicans are in because they yoked "themselves to the clueless George W. Bush" is absolutely absurd, and only a jealous little twit would say such a thing. Lowbrow? How about this: f--k you, peanut head. Why don't you go shopping for a new sweater or, better yet, buy a new mirror.

JAY AND MICHELLE FOOS

Via e-mail

SPOON FED

Thank you for the recent article by Thomas E. Woods Jr., "Unnatural Disaster" (Feb. 23). I thought it was relevant, cogent, and eloquent and did not require a Ph.D. in economics to understand.

I appreciate his ability to distill and coordinate multiple economic factors often clouded by emotional, political, and personal ignorance and suppression down to fundamental, axiomatic distinctions that left me educated and clear on what actions I can take toward prosperity.

RAY PARADISE

San Jose, Calif.

HURRAH FOR ALHURRA

I am writing regarding Philip Giralaldi's March 9 "Deep Background: Boos for Alhurra." The article misstates several basic facts regarding Alhurra and Radio Sawa, the Arabic-language television and radio networks launched by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors.

The statement that American international broadcasting was developed to be "propaganda rather than balanced news," is wrong. Alhurra and Radio Sawa are required, by law, to "be conducted in accordance with the highest professional standards of broadcast journalism;" and to broadcast news that is, "accurate, objective and comprehensive."

Mr. Giralaldi references negative incidents from 2006—in the news world these are dusty to say the least.

Here are the facts:

Research conducted by international firms such as ACNielsen, shows that Alhurra and Radio Sawa have an unduplicated weekly audience of 35 million people, a vast majority of whom find the news credible. In Iraq, Alhurra is reaching 56 percent of the audience, exceeding Al-Jazeera's viewership in that country. By any standard of media measurement, these are impressive numbers.

Alhurra is increasing understanding of American society and foreign policy. In Morocco, 68 percent of Alhurra's audience says that Alhurra has increased their understanding of American culture and society. Similar numbers are found in Syria and Kuwait. When asked about understanding of U.S. foreign policy, 58 percent of Iraqi viewers, 70 percent of UAE viewers and 68 percent of Moroccan viewers agreed that Alhurra contributed to their comprehension of U.S. policy.

Alhurra and Radio Sawa are frequently cited in the Arabic and English press as sources of news including recently in the *New York Times*, AFP, the pan-Arab newspaper *Alsharq Alswat*, and *Yemen Times*.

Alhurra is the only Arabic-language network with dedicated correspondents at the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and Congress. No other broadcaster to the Middle East provides this breadth of information about the United States.

LETITIA KING

Broadcasting Board of Governors

Via e-mail

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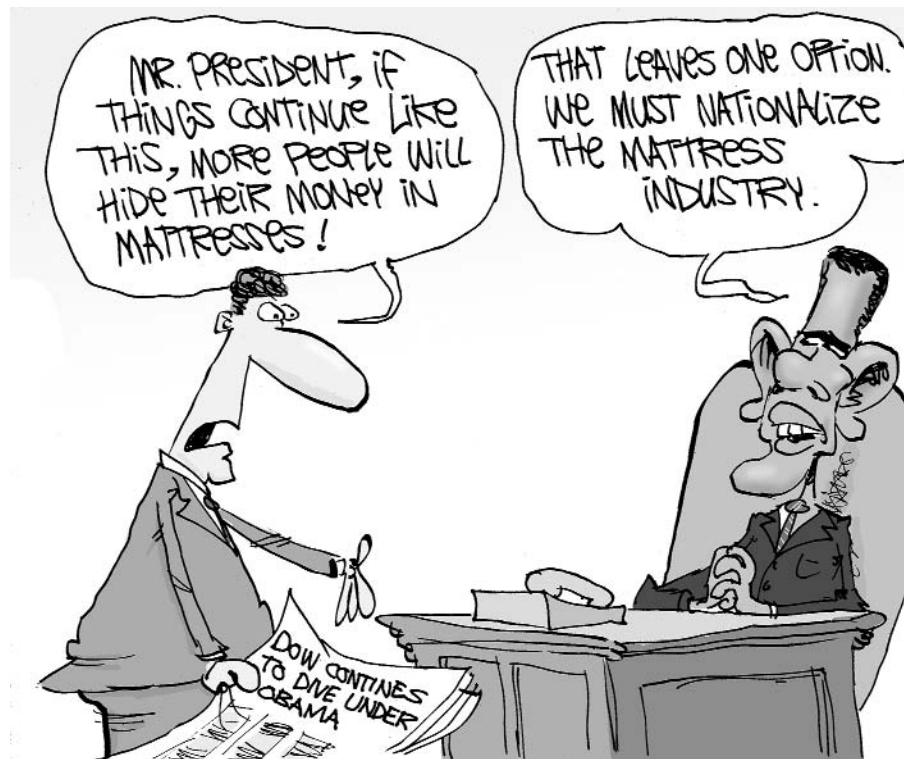
[CULTURE]

TAXES & DEATH

What does Barack Obama mean when he says he's getting politics out of science? "We make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology," the president asserted as he announced his decision to provide federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research. Millions of taxpayers believe these experiments are unethical as they require the destruction of embryonic human life. Obama has decided that these Americans do not deserve a choice. His idea of ending a political dispute entails one side triumphing completely—and compelling the losers to pay for what they consider an abomination.

As *Washington Examiner* columnist Tim Carney observes, "Destroying human embryos to harvest stem cells has never been illegal in the United States, and many laboratories have been carrying out this sort of research for years, either with private money or with state taxpayer money." But biotech firms and their trade group, the Biotechnology Industry Organization, have not been content to rely on the market. BIO spent \$7.7 million lobbying last year—compared with just \$4.9 million spent by the American Petroleum Institute, according to Carney. How many liberals, he asks, would have considered a decision by President Bush to open national parks to oil prospecting, "depoliticizing drilling" or "restoring geology to its rightful place"?

Republicans have long been afraid to address the moral quandaries involved in embryonic stem-cell research. President Bush, showing something less than the wisdom of Solomon, tried to split the difference by funding research on existing stem-cell lines. (A questionable enough position from a pro-life perspective, and all the more hazardous considering that any successful treatments developed from embryonic



cells would create a massive demand for the harvesting of more material from embryos.) John McCain proclaimed his support for the research, which did not stop Democrats from claiming he opposed it. Republicans have a little trouble with moral clarity where human life is concerned.

But they should at least be clear about the other principles involved—there is no need for the federal government to support this research, whether on lines existing or new. Obama may consider federal funding a non-political matter, but Republican leaders—especially any who wish to be contenders in 2012—ought to understand that politics is present wherever money and government mix.

[WORLD]

LAPDOG WHIMPERS

The American media scarcely covered Gordon Brown's Washington visit. In Britain, however, a furor erupted after several newspapers complained bitterly that President Obama had repeatedly "snubbed" the prime minister. The new administration, they said, was attempting to downplay "the special relationship."

What were these supposed slights? First, Team Obama cancelled an outdoor photo-op with Brown, citing the snow as its excuse. Then the president truncated a press conference by skipping the usual welcoming remarks for

his guest. Poor old Gordon didn't even get an invitation to lunch.

The British leader came bearing gifts: an ornamental pen holder made from the timbers of a Victorian anti-slave ship and a first-edition biography of—you guessed it—Winston Churchill. In return, Obama gave him a DVD box set of movies including "Star Wars" and "ET." (To make matters worse, the discs were probably bought in America, making them incompatible with British players.)

"We get the point, sunshine," wrote the *Daily Telegraph's* Iain Martin. "We're just one of many allies and you want fancy new friends. ... When it comes to men, munitions and commitment you'll soon find out why it pays to at least treat the Brits with some manners."

Certainly, Obama's generosity leaves something to be desired. And he didn't indulge in the fanfare and let's-get-the-baddies bonhomie that characterized President Bush's relationship with Tony Blair. Yet Britain's hacks almost ignored President Obama's remark that "The special relationship between the United States and Great Britain is one that is not just important to me, it is important to the American people." Not exactly rude. Some Brits, however, would rather be smothered in flattery, even if it means becoming embroiled in two seemingly endless wars.

[JUSTICE]

SPY GAME

The *Washington Post* dares not call it treason. On March 11, it editorialized that Attorney General Eric Holder should drop the case against AIPAC officials Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman. The pair are under indictment—and due to stand trial in June—for passing Israel classified Pentagon information about our Iran strategy. Larry Franklin, their source in the neocon-controlled Office of Special Plans, is serving nearly 13 years in prison.

Back in 2006, arguing for a dismissal of the charges, attorney Abbe Lowell referred to Israel as “an ally of the United States, whose interests are exactly the same.” Ergo, his clients’ actions couldn’t have compromised America’s security because it is inseparable from Israel’s.

The *Post* is less brazen, but its arguments are no less weak. The Espionage Act is too “archaic.” (The Ten Commandments weren’t exactly Twittered.) Private citizens shouldn’t be expected to keep their government’s secrets. (One wonders what the duties of allegiance might then entail.) And, finally, the charges will be hard to prove. On the last count, the editorialist is correct—and apparently unaware that blind justice allows no such calculation.

As the trial approaches, expect increased pressure on DOJ to drop the charges. If the Chas Freeman controversy (detailed in this issue’s cover piece) was any indication of the players’ respective stamina, the Obama administration will fold without a fight—and Rosen and Weissman will again be free to hawk their wares.

[EXECUTIVE]

THE REVISER

President Bush routinely nullified the very laws he swore to enforce just by adding a few lines after his signature. The Decider issued hundreds of “signing

statements” while in office, breaking any limits that inconvenienced the Freedom Agenda. The American Bar Association called these “contrary to the rule of law and our constitutional separation of powers.” And Obama seemed to agree. During the campaign he said, “[Bush] has been saying, I can change what Congress passed. ... I can choose to interpret it this way or that way. ... I disagree with that. I taught the Constitution for 10 years. We’re not going to use signing statements as a way of doing an end-run around the Constitution.” He even issued a memo to executive-branch officials telling them to check with the Justice Department before following any of Bush’s signed orders. Liberals trumpeted the return of lawful government.

Unfortunately, within a week of that memo, Obama attached his own signing statement to the \$410 billion omnibus bill. He put Congress on notice that the White House has deemed unspecified elements of the bill unconstitutional and won’t follow them. He later proclaimed, “I will issue signing statements to address constitutional concerns only when it is appropriate to do so as a means of discharging my constitutional responsibilities.” In other words: Rest easy, I ignore the laws I sign responsibly. Predictably, liberals are still trumpeting the return of lawful government.

DailyKos announced, “Obama Pledges Sparing Use of Signing Statements.” *Washington Monthly* declared that he is “returning to constitutional and institutional norms that existed before 2001.” The *New York Times* praised Obama for being “consistent with what he said in the 2008 presidential campaign.”

Times must be tough when the only truth-teller one can find in the major media is Ari Fleisher. The former Bush spokesman said of the Obama administration, “They’re going to do the same thing [we did], whenever they feel like it.” ■

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The American Conservative, Vol. 8, No. 6, March 23, 2009 (ISSN 1540-966X). Reg. U.S. Pat. & Tm. Off. *TAC* is published 24 times per year, biweekly (except for January and August) for \$49.97 per year by The American Conservative, LLC, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209. Periodicals postage paid at Arlington, VA, and additional mailing offices. Printed in the United States of America. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The American Conservative*, P.O. Box 9030, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9030.

Subscription rates: \$49.97 per year (24 issues) in the U.S., \$54.97 in Canada (U.S. funds), and \$89.97 other foreign, via airmail. Back issues: \$6.00 (prepaid) per copy in USA, \$7.00 in Canada (U.S. funds).

For subscription orders, payments, and other subscription inquiries —

By phone: **800-579-6148**

(outside the U.S./Canada 856-380-4131)

Via Web: www.amconmag.com

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Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery of your first issue.

Inquiries and letters to the editor should be sent to letters@amconmag.com. For advertising sales call Ronald Burr at 703-893-3632. For editorial, call 703-875-7600.

This issue went to press on March 12, 2009.

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Freeman's Fight

The Israel lobby gets its man—and tips its hand.

By Philip Weiss

CHARLES FREEMAN JR.'S withdrawal of his acceptance of a high-level intelligence position in the Obama administration was a national-security drama more riveting than an episode of "24." The moral was clear: even a president who owes his job to a progressive movement in American politics could not support a longtime public servant who had made the mistake of criticizing Israel. Fierce advocates of the Jewish state, notably Sens. Chuck Schumer and Joe Lieberman and Reps. Eric Cantor and Steve Israel, played important roles in Freeman's exit, while present and former officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee flitted in and out of the wings.

The message to all office-seekers is obvious. "They want to kill the chicken to scare the monkeys. They want other people to be intimidated," Freeman told *The American Conservative* just before he withdrew his name to be chairman of the National Intelligence Council. He went on, "If the administration does not stick with me, then it's destroying the argument that the Israel lobby is only a mythic entity and does not control the public space. ... It will show the world that it is not able to exercise independent thinking on these issues."

If there was encouraging news in the administration's collapse, there it was. When Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair announced Freeman's withdrawal late on the afternoon of March 10, the matter was on center stage, in plain sight of what Freeman calls "the American political class."

Three hours later, Freeman issued a statement directly accusing the Israel lobby of "doing widening damage to the national security of the United States." He wrote that its tactics "plumb the depths of dishonor and indecency and include character assassination, selective misquotation, the willful distortion of the record, the fabrication of falsehoods, and an utter disregard for the truth." He continued:

I believe that the inability of the American public to discuss, or the government to consider, any option for U.S. policies in the Middle East opposed by the ruling faction in Israeli politics has allowed that faction to adopt and sustain policies that ultimately threaten the existence of the state of Israel. It is not permitted for anyone in the United States to say so.

Freeman's ability to say so to a wide audience was electrifying and unique. His charge was soon mentioned in the chief boroughs of liberal opinion, National Public Radio, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. *Time*'s Joe Klein called his exit "an assassination," and *The Atlantic*'s Andrew Sullivan said it was a "scalping." Unlike countless other incidents in which American policy on the Middle East has been compromised behind closed doors, this time the Israel lobby was seen fleeing the scene of the crime.

The drama began on Feb. 19, when the *Foreign Policy* blog reported that Blair, a retired Navy admiral, was plan-

ning to name Freeman to chair the National Intelligence Council, which sorts out the reports of the many intelligence agencies and presents them to the White House. In 2007, one of its assessments, concluding that Iran had halted its nuclear-weapons program following the invasion of Iraq, chilled the neoconservative drive to attack Iran. "No one has ever made the case that it's a primary policy-making role," says William Quandt, the longtime expert on the Middle East.

Freeman is hardly a cipher. An outspoken and formidable thinker firmly in the realist camp, he spent four decades in the State Department marked by his poise in the presence of heads of state. In 1972, at age 29, having mastered Mandarin, he was saving Richard Nixon, whom he regarded as "totally lacking in personal grace, with no sense of the proper distance to keep in human relations," from embarrassment with Zhou En-Lai on the famous trip to China. Twenty years later, as an Arabic speaker, he was interpreting George H.W. Bush—a fellow Yaleman and blueblood who fixed his name forever as "Chas"—to King Fahd as ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. Freeman is a throwback. He celebrates his Puritan roots and the idea of wide historical reading for its own sake. He is also completely dedicated. He lost his third son in India because of poor medical treatment. He lost a 30-year marriage in Saudi Arabia during the long hours of the Gulf War.

"Frankly I was hoping to see him

become a secretary of state,” says Edward Kane, a former CIA official who heads the Cosmos Club’s program on foreign affairs.

Freeman’s position on the Middle East made such ambitions pointless. In fact, he had resisted being sent to the region in the 1980s because of the “totalitarian” character of debate over American policies there—the lobby’s “virtual hammerlock on American foreign policy,” as he told an interviewer in the mid-’90s. He went on bluntly:

The American Jewish community, which had always been extremely suspicious of people who trafficked with the Arabs ... became increasingly hostile to Arabists in the State Department. It essentially became difficult, if not impossible, for Foreign Service officers dealing with the Arab world, or with the Middle East generally, to take anything other than a stance that was assertively loyal to causes espoused by the Israelis... By the ’80s, as AIPAC ... achieved the transcendent influence in the Congress that it did, there was an atmosphere of intimidation, worthy of the McCarthy era, in many respects, imposed on Arabists.

Following his retirement from government in 1995, Freeman took over from George McGovern as head of the Middle East Policy Council, a think tank that gets Saudi support and seeks to educate Americans about the Arab and Muslim world.

I asked him whether he is an Arabist. “What is an Arabist?” he countered. “Maybe it’s just someone who speaks Arabic. Someone who understands the Arabs. Obviously, that’s a bad thing. We shouldn’t understand the Arabs. We might actually think they have justice on their side. We might want to negotiate with them rather than clobber them.”

Freeman openly admires Israel: “The good has outweighed the bad in Israel for a long time. I would like to see Israel survive and prosper. Right now it is doing itself in and taking us with it.” Years ago, he became aware of how fierce adherence to Israel in our political class was damaging both nations. “I came to all this really very late,” he says. “I was an admirer of what I thought was a humane society in Israel. What really got me was when I was in Abu Dhabi many years ago and turned on the local TV. There was a home video of two Israeli plainclothesmen pulling a Palestinian teenager out of his house and kicking him in the head, and when he was semiconscious, they shot him in the back of the head. And the same story was on the back page of the English language newspaper, with six panels from the video. I thought, when this hits the U.S. press, all hell will break loose. Well, it didn’t ever hit our press. The self-censorship extended to a point that it was really dangerous to our society.”

Freeman made no secret of these views at the Middle East Policy Council. After the cancellation of the Dubai ports contract in 2006, he denounced the political class for exploiting the popular prejudice of “Arabophobia.” Soon after, when the *London Review of Books* published Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer’s bombshell essay on the Israel lobby, Freeman unapologetically celebrated the scholars.

“He does not hide his light under a bushel, and we’ve been waiting a long time for these ideas,” Edward Kane says. Adds Jim Lobe, a foreign-policy correspondent for Interpress, “I can tell you from personal experience that he is absolutely brilliant and incredibly well-rounded in his knowledge.”

In 2005, Freeman’s friend Boyden Gray saw his appointment to be ambassador to the EU held up for months because of his association with realist

thinking on the Middle East, and he had to visit with AIPAC before he could take the job. Freeman’s case was far more serious. His appointment had only been leaked when it drew the wrath of the Israel lobby. Steve Rosen, a former AIPAC staffer who is under indictment for allegedly passing secrets to the Israelis, immediately attacked Freeman on the website of the Middle East Forum, a neoconservative think tank. “Freeman is a strident critic of Israel and a textbook case of the old-line Arabism that afflicted American diplomacy at the time the state of Israel was born,” Rosen said. He quoted this horrifying statement by Freeman: “Israeli occupation and settlement of Arab lands is inherently violent. ... And as long as such Israeli violence against Palestinians continues, it is utterly unrealistic to expect that Palestinians will stand down from violent resistance and retaliation against Israelis.”

At least Rosen was straightforward about his concern with Israel. The same cannot be said of the pack that followed him. They focused on the money that the Middle East Policy Council receives from Saudi Arabia and several cold-blooded statements that Freeman had made justifying Chinese repression in Tiananmen Square and Tibet (which his supporters attempted to dignify, not always persuasively, as “realist”). The group included Gabriel Schoenfeld at the *Wall Street Journal*, Jonathan Chait and Martin Peretz at *The New Republic*, Jeffrey Goldberg at *The Atlantic*, and Michael Goldfarb at the *Weekly Standard*. All Jewish, all supporters of the Iraq War, which Freeman vigorously opposed.

The focus on the China and Saudi connections is typical of the Israel lobby’s work. While it quietly spreads the word about its ability to take scalps, it does not like to do so publicly. That might force Americans to debate the

slaughter in Gaza or the ongoing oppression of Palestinians in the West Bank. Far better for Freeman's critics in Congress—notably Joe Lieberman in the Senate and Eric Cantor, Shelly Berkley, and Mark Kirk in the House—to talk about Saudi Arabian money, which was never an impediment to Hillary Clinton's appointment to be secretary of state, though her husband's library was showered in it.

The good news in the Freeman case is that he was even named in the first place and that he got a public defense. Writers Joe Klein, Richard Silverstein, M.J. Rosenberg, and Glenn Greenwald, all Jews, said that the issue was whether there was any room in the discourse for critics of Israel. Klein called the attackers a “mob.” Robert Dreyfuss at the *Nation* denounced the “thunderous, coordinated assault.” Steve Walt characterized the campaign as a McCarthyite witchhunt with an important negative function: making ambitious public servants afraid to say anything about Israel. “Freeman might be too smart, too senior, and too well-qualified to stop,” he wrote before the appointment was scuttled, “but there are plenty of younger people eager to rise in the foreign policy establishment and they need to be reminded that their careers could be jeopardized if they followed in Freeman's footsteps and said what they thought.”

There could be little doubt what was at stake. Jim Lobe said on Scott Horton's radio show that the fight was the “first big test of the influence of the so-called Israel lobby in the Administration.” Freeman wrote to friends, “I suspect that my appointment won't be final till the fat lady at AIPAC sighs.”

The fight dragged on for nearly three weeks. Freeman's critics circulated e-mailed comments he had made about China on a foreign-policy listserv, and eight congressmen, including House

Minority Leader John Boehner, called on Blair to investigate Freeman's links to Saudi Arabia. Blair wrote back that Freeman had his “full support” and said that he “has never received any income directly from Saudi Arabia or any Saudi-controlled entity.” He defended him against angry questioning by Joe Lieberman on the morning of March 10. But by then, several Republican senators were demanding answers from the White House. Dianne Feinstein reportedly called for a meeting of senators with Freeman. He was gaining endorsements from influential journalists like Andrew Sullivan and James Fallows, but no congressman was lifting his head above the melee to support Freeman.

As for Obama, he said not a word, just as he said nothing about Gaza. Finally, by the afternoon of March 10, Blair had changed his mind. “I came to a conclusion, as did Denny Blair at the same time,” Freeman told *TAC*, “that I couldn't accomplish what I wanted to do.” Yes, he could come up with quality intelligence products, but his presence would hurt their credibility. “I left for the same reason that I accepted the job, for the best interests of my country.”

Chuck Schumer quickly made clear that this was a White House decision, and it was all about Israel. “Charles Freeman was the wrong guy for this position,” Schumer said. “His statements against Israel were way over the top and severely out of step with the administration. I repeatedly urged the White House to reject him, and I am glad they did the right thing.”

Then Freeman issued his barnburner of a statement saying it was all about “a Lobby intent on enforcing the will and interests of a foreign government.” “There is a special irony in having been accused of improper regard for the opinions of foreign governments and societies by a group so clearly intent on enforcing adherence to the policies of a

foreign government—in this case, the government of Israel,” he wrote. “This is not just a tragedy for Israelis and their neighbors in the Middle East; it is doing widening damage to the national security of the United States.”

National Public Radio's Robert Siegel described Freeman's charge as “angry” and suggested that he was merely the Marty Peretz of the Arabs. The *Washington Post* called it a “crackpot” conspiracy theory and tirade. Meanwhile, Freeman's supporters rallied to his side. Steve Walt called Obama a “wimp.” “Caving on Freeman was a blunder that could come back to haunt any subsequent effort to address the deteriorating situation in the region,” he wrote. Andrew Sullivan said that the affair showed that when push comes to shove, Obama is behind AIPAC “110 percent.” Joe Klein noted that Schumer and company have made Washington “even less hospitable for those who aren't afraid to speak their minds, for those who are reflexively contentious, who would defy the conventional wisdom.”

This is where I differ from Chas Freeman's new friends. Years ago, he understood that the Israel lobby produced secret resentment among its victims throughout Washington. More recently, John Mearsheimer told me that Israel's critics are engaged in a kind of “mortal combat” in which career and reputation are at stake. Having long battled the Israel lobby, these men have no illusions about how it operates and still dare to speak out. Others—for instance those who say that it just controls Congress, not the White House—are now awaking to its methods. This is the great lesson, and even joy, of Chas Freeman's mugging. A lobby operates best as a “night flower,” Steve Rosen once said. The Freeman takedown happened in broad daylight. Sunshine means everything in a democracy. Now the diverse political forces who want to change our Mideast

policy can find one another.

Speaking to this magazine two days after his withdrawal, a reflective Freeman framed the episode as a chance to educate Americans. He only regretted imprecision—that he had blasted the lobby rather than doing more to emphasize the reflexive organizational American support for the policies of the right-wing Israeli government.

Of the Gaza assault, he said, “I don’t think they wanted to do anything but beat the living daylight out of the Palestinian people. *Schrecklichkeit* [a World War I German policy of intimidation] is the basis of this policy, and it makes it harder and harder for more and more people here to overlook.”

Freeman was gratified by the wide support he had gotten from Jewish writers. “I think the most courageous people on this issue are those of Jewish origin or faith. They have the most at stake in this. These things are being done in their name.” He said he hoped that his withdrawal would allow Americans to talk about what Israel is doing in a historical and diplomatic light:

I am interested in seeing the survival of a humane and not a thugish Jewish state in the Middle East. I am interested in finding ways of coming to grips with the fact that the perpetrators of the Holocaust and those who halted it accept Israel’s right to exist, but in the region in which it does exist, no one accepts its right to exist. That’s the problem we must overcome.

As for himself, at 66, having severed his institutional connections, Freeman has a chance to “redefine myself.” He doesn’t expect to have any role in government, directly or indirectly, “but one thing I’m not going to do is shut up.” ■

Philip Weiss blogs at www.philipweiss.org/mondoweiss/.

Insuring Disaster

Why are we bailing out AIG—again?

By John Carney

IN LAST SUMMER’S blockbuster “The Dark Knight,” the Joker invites one of the top crime lords of Gotham City to the rundown warehouse where he has stashed his ill-gotten gains. The mobster stares in awe at the huge stack of money the arch-criminal has amassed. But a moment later, his awe turns to horror as the Joker sets the money aflame.

“This town deserves a better class of criminal,” he explains.

The exchange reveals the deep evil of the Joker. Unlike a common criminal, he doesn’t just want to steal money from others. He wants to destroy their wealth.

When Americans discovered a few weeks ago that federal officials had spent another weekend of Diet Coke-fueled all-nighters concocting yet another bailout of the American International Group, they might have been reminded of this scene. This was the fourth time since September that taxpayers had rescued AIG from collapse. The new \$30 billion infusion from the Treasury brought the total amount of taxpayer dollars delivered to AIG to \$160 billion.

The new money was needed because AIG had suffered \$60 billion worth of losses in the last four months of 2008—the biggest quarterly loss ever recorded by a single company. In fact, not many companies have even come close to being large enough to lose that much. So is AIG the most efficient wealth-destroyer the world has ever seen? Is AIG the Joker?

Fortunately not. It isn’t actually setting our money on fire. It is not destroy-

ing the fortune the government has handed it.

Unfortunately, AIG does bear more than a superficial resemblance to the Joker’s crime lord guest. It is perhaps the most efficient redistribution machine ever built. Instead of destroying taxpayer wealth, AIG has been spreading it around to a clutch of well-connected banks, domestic and foreign. As AIG’s chief executive, Ed Liddy, has explained, the company is acting as a conduit to funnel money from taxpayers to dozens of financial institutions around the world.

At the heart of AIG’s problems is a financial product called a credit default swap, which is really just an insurance contract on debt. If a borrower failed to pay off a loan fully, an investor protected by a credit default swap would be able to collect the outstanding amount from the insurance company. The idea was that credit default swaps would reduce the risk to any investor who bought bonds. In the best of worlds, they would reduce risk throughout the financial system by spreading out the costs of defaults. But that’s not how things worked out.

Instead, credit default swaps came to be used by banks in a way that no one anticipated—to avoid banking regulations. And AIG decided to get into the business of enabling this scheme.

Banks around the world operate under guidelines that determine how much capital they must hold in reserve. The rules, known as Basel II, say that the riskier the assets held by a bank, the

larger the reserve they have to maintain. A U.S. Treasury bond owned by a bank does not require a reserve at all, a AAA corporate loan might only require a 20 percent reserve, and a junk-bond might require a reserve over the total value of the bond. The point is to make banks more financially secure in the event that borrowers default.

But the rules also allowed banks to reduce the riskiness of their assets by purchasing insurance on them. This created a huge demand for credit default swaps as a kind of regulatory arbitrage. The banks were able to comply with regulations while maximizing their own profits.

Say you are running a bank in Europe. You have a bunch of deposits you want to invest in assets that will give you the highest return with the lowest risk. If you buy a bunch of junk-bonds, that is counterproductive. Even if you earn more for each dollar you invest, the reserve requirements will tell you that you can't invest as much. Now if you throw a credit default swap on, which you could buy cheaply from AIG, you can invest more of your depositors' money. In effect, you get extra credit for the swap when calculating your reserve requirements.

AIG sold \$527 billion worth of credit default swaps. That is far more money than the insurer could ever pay back. There's no way it could make good on even a tiny fraction of them. It convinced itself, however, that only a sliver of the claims on those credit default swaps would come due. In the meantime, the company racked up fees for selling the swaps. It seemed like a money-making machine.

But isn't it insane for banks to keep buying insurance policies from a company that obviously can't pay them back? Bankers didn't see it that way because they shared AIG's expectation that few of these credit default swaps

would ever come due. They didn't expect to ever collect on the insurance policies.

So why take out insurance if you're confident you'll never need it? That brings us back to the regulatory arbitrage. The main reason for buying credit default swaps was that the regulations rewarded banks for buying them, allowing them to hold less money in reserve and invest more. Credit default swaps were more like regulatory compliance policies than insurance policies.

This wasn't exactly top secret. AIG sold banks credit default swaps covering bonds worth hundreds of billions of dollars for precisely this regulatory reason. AIG's annual statement revealed that about \$379 billion of the \$527 billion in the company's default swap portfolio "represent[ed] derivatives written for financial institutions, principally in Europe, for the purpose of providing them with regulatory capital relief rather than risk mitigation." That is, they were tools for getting around the rules.

Many of the banks had another reason to forget their worries about AIG's ability to pay out on the insurance—they assumed that a complete AIG meltdown was what we call a "financial Armageddon" bet. The idea was that AIG would never be allowed to default on its obligations. American taxpayers would bail it out. And if the taxpayers couldn't afford to bail out AIG, then the whole world would be in such dire straits that the main concerns would be food, shelter, and ammo, not the performance of a loan portfolio.

Now these banks that bought the credit default swaps are the ones on the receiving end of the AIG conduit of taxpayer money. By bailing out AIG, and therefore bailing out its counterparties, the U.S. government rewards rule bending and reckless behavior. And it is punishing responsible credit-insurance writ-

ing, essentially telling everyone who placed a premium on buying insurance from a solvent insurer that they were suckers. They should have bought the cheap contracts from AIG instead.

Perhaps most galling of all, the government has been refusing to reveal which banks have been receiving payouts funneled through AIG, claiming the insurance contracts are private business matters. Fortunately, someone at AIG seems to be leaking the names to the *Wall Street Journal*. The biggest U.S. recipient is Goldman Sachs. Merrill Lynch, Bank of America, Morgan Stanley, and Wachovia have also received payouts. But a far larger share is reportedly going to foreign banks, including Deutsche Bank, Société Générale, Calyon, Barclays, Rabobank, Danske, HSBC, Royal Bank of Scotland, Banco Santander, and Lloyds Banking Group. Ironically, one of the banks reported to have been on the receiving end of the taxpayer dollars passed through AIG is the Swiss bank UBS. It has been at the center of a battle with the American government over allegations that it helped wealthy clients evade U.S. taxes by hiding money in Swiss bank accounts. So the bank that helped tax dodgers is now receiving financial assistance from taxpayers.

It's hard not to suspect that the reason Obama's Treasury Department doesn't want to reveal these recipients' names is fear of a public backlash against the bailout of AIG. We were told that saving Wall Street would benefit Main Street. Instead, the bailout bucks have been going to Paris's Champs Élysées, Frankfurt's Bankenviertel, and London's Square Mile.

Maybe they just have a better class of banker. ■

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Europe is a Riot

The collapse of the economy may presage violence across the continent.

By Theodore Dalrymple

SOME TIME AGO, I asked a man in a bar where he was from.

"I'm European," he replied.

"Yes," I said, "but where are you from?"

"I'm European," he insisted.

In fact, he was obviously German, and perhaps only a German would have answered in this fashion. There are certain Germans with an excessive sensitivity to their country's historical crimes for whom it might have seemed like the beginning of the slippery slope to world domination to have replied, "I'm German."

But only someone with a cloth ear could fail to detect the false note in my interlocutor's reply. While many people will admit that they are European, few—apart, perhaps, from the deracinated bureaucrats on the Brussels gravy train—will admit to feeling European or identifying viscerally with Europe as a political entity. While many people support membership in the European Union on the grounds that it is good for their country, very few do so on the grounds that it is good for Europe. Ask not what you can do for Europe; ask, rather, what Europe can do for you.

Still, the pretense continues that the EU is more than a marriage of convenience born of the pan-European wars of the 20th century and sustained by the continent's ongoing decline in importance. The "European project," as some writers who fall halfway between intellectual and apparatchik are inclined to call it, is sometimes presented to the public as if it were a grand utopian experiment to make all men brothers. Just as Jehovah's Witnesses hand out pamphlets portraying

lions as very large, presumably vegetarian, domestic cats and grizzly bears as cuddly friends of children—once, of course, everyone has become a Jehovah's Witness—so Eurocrats and Europhiles are inclined to talk of common destinies, eternal friendships, and the like. The Portuguese lion will lie down with the Estonian lamb, and all will be well.

Alas, current economic circumstances seem to have interrupted this pleasing daydream and introduced unpleasant realities. When you're coasting along and financial growth seems to be the natural order of things, you can dream what you like. But the moment a contraction sets in, when it is a question of manning the economic lifeboats as it were, everyone wakes up quicker than you can say "Abandon ship!"

When French president Nicolas Sarkozy announced a large state loan to ailing French carmakers Renault and PSA-Citroen, everyone understood what it meant. Of course, Sarkozy said that it was a commercial loan at 6 percent interest. But the question naturally arises as to why the French banks—which are a lot less unprofitable than their American counterparts—did not then offer their assistance. In plain language, the loan was a temporary subsidy for companies that, in the normal course of business, would have gone bankrupt. While there is much to be said in favor of such a helping hand in difficult times, it cannot truthfully be presented as a purely commercial decision or transaction.

The real problem, however, was that Sarkozy also suggested that if the companies were to close factories any-

where, they should close them abroad and not in France. What, then, of the common European home? According to the ideology of Europe, it should be a matter of sublime political indifference to leaders where the jobs in commercial companies are located. Renault and Citroen-PSA should have their factories wherever it is in their commercial interest to have them and nowhere else. Almost by definition, many of them would not be in France. But Sarkozy is president of France, not of anywhere else, and his electors, with the lamentable national parochialism that is still prevalent everywhere, care more about what happens in France than what happens anywhere else. They wouldn't think much of a French president who lent taxpayers' money to preserve jobs in the Czech Republic.

Stresses and strains are appearing across Europe, resuscitating the prospects of political extremism. In Greece, the riots sparked by the police shooting of a 15-year-old boy in December 2008, which were the worst in the country's recent history, were clearly worsened and prolonged by hundreds of young anarchists, many of whom carried the black and red anarchist flag (the colors also of Castro's movement and the Sandinistas).

Although nominally of the far Left, the rioters could just as well have been of the far Right. The situation of Greece in some ways now resembles that of Romania in the 1920s. The number of university graduates rose in Romania fivefold during that decade, but there were few jobs for them, so there were many young men either underemployed or employed in positions

that they felt degrading for their level of education. Greece is in precisely this situation now, with large and rising numbers of educated and unemployed or underemployed young men. In Romania, such young men tended to join the radical, anti-Semitic Iron Guard, which blamed Jews for everything. No one should doubt the possibility of a similar reaction in Greece, with its half million illegal immigrants from Albania, the Middle East, and Africa, as economic deterioration continues and desperation grows. Of course, the economic conditions that the angry young men of Greece—who during the riots looked both fit and well dressed—are likely to experience would have made the young men of Romania in the 1920s deeply envious. But what counts is dashed hopes and frustrated expectations, not absolute levels of consumption.

It is not only in the peripheral economies of Europe that social conditions are auspicious for the development of extremist violence of one kind or another. France showed the way in 2005, and life in the *banlieues* of Paris continues to be a slow-motion riot, in which cars are burnt out every night.

In 2006, relatively privileged students rioted in the Boulevard Saint-Germain when the prime minister of the time, Dominique de Villepin, tried to ease the labor market for the unemployed youth of the *banlieues*. The position of the students was akin to that of the white miners in South Africa, who struck in 1922 when the mine-owners replaced them with black workers and the South African Communist Party supported the strikers with the slogan “Workers of the World, Unite for a White South Africa!” To use black miners was to increase profits and therefore exploitation.

The combustibility of the situation in France was further shown by the nasty little riot in the Gard du Nord in 2007, when a young man was arrested after exercising his inalienable right to punch

two ticket inspectors in the face as they questioned his equally inalienable right to jump over the ticket barrier without paying his fare. This riot was in some respects more worrying than those of 2005, in that young men from ethnic minorities rioted in the center of Paris, which they had not dared to do two years earlier, even at the height of the unrest.

In 2007, young Germans showed in Rostock that they still knew how to be violent. One thousand people were injured during the riots that preceded the meeting of G8 leaders there. The troublemakers did not look as though they would have many qualms about instigating much worse violence. And all this before the economic crisis had even made itself felt, when youth unemployment was only 11.2 percent in Germany and 19.2 percent in France.

But it is in Britain that the potential for violent social unrest is the greatest, for thanks to the corrupt improvidence of prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, Britain is not only the hardest hit of any of the major European countries by the crisis, but its social conditions are the worst. If the government had actually wanted social unrest and violence in the event of a severe economic downturn, it could hardly have arranged things better.

During all the years of so-called growth—a mirage, of course, based on easy credit, asset value inflation, and indebtedness both public and private—from 1997 to 2007, both the proportion, and latterly the absolute numbers, of British-born adults in work declined, while the numbers of immigrant workers increased. In the last ten years, almost all new employment, at least 40 percent of it in the public sector, has been taken by immigrants, while the number of native-born unemployed in receipt of permanent social-security benefits of one kind or another has remained constant. They have simply been transferred from the list of unemployed to the list of sick, in

order to substantiate the government's bogus claim to have reduced unemployment. In the process, the government has succeeded, in times of supposedly unprecedented prosperity, in producing 30 percent more invalids in contemporary Britain than the total of men wounded in World War I (many of whom recovered, unlike modern British invalids wounded by the welfare state).

At least 80 percent of the immigrants came from outside the European Union and, having been granted indefinite leave to stay, have created huge obligations upon the government toward them in the event of their unemployment, since they are most unlikely ever to return whence they came. As the tax base declines, so the expenditure obligations increase.

As if this were not enough, the government has done all in its power to ensure that there are no forms of social solidarity that do not pass through a government department—it went to the trouble of *de facto* nationalizing all the major charities well before it nationalized the banks. Forty-two percent of British children are now born illegitimate, and at least 25 percent can expect to live in a single-parent household, while many others live with serial step-parents, which is perhaps worse still. This is not a form of family life that can exist on a mass scale without state subvention, which if suddenly withdrawn or greatly reduced would plunge large numbers of people into real poverty. It conduces to common criminality, which is now rampant in Britain.

In short, the British government behaved as if there were, and could be, no tomorrow. Brown said there would be no more boom and bust under his management, which in a sense is correct: he has made sure that there won't be a boom for a long time to come. In the meantime, the stage has been set for social conflict on a wide scale. The government might find itself unable to main-

tain the living standards of the very large proportion of the population that it has made dependent on it, in which case the already large criminal population will find many willing recruits. Ethnic and cultural strife, and radical xenophobia, will become evident as different “communities” press their claims for support in an increasingly zero-sum game. There have already been strikes protesting the use of foreign labor, even when it comes from the European Union, in oil refineries and power stations, suggesting that European law requiring freedom of movement of labor will either become a dead letter or a cause of strife. Either way, it does not look good for the “European project.”

Not long ago, I had occasion to stay for a few weeks in a once-industrial town in the north of England. The last steel mills had just closed down. I was surprised by the elegance of much of the early 19th-century architecture, now completely overwhelmed by the brutalism of the 1960s and '70s. The prematurely middle-aged spent their time looking for second-hand clothes in charity shops. Pawnshops had also made a big comeback. Feral young men with an expression of urban predation on their faces stood around on street corners in nylon tracksuits and hoods, muttering f---ing this and f---ing that to one another. About half the people in the street were unemployed young immigrants, mainly of Middle Eastern origin, on the lookout for a bit of small-scale trafficking. Some took advantage of free Internet access in the public library—a concrete building aesthetically suitable as the headquarters of the Stasi—to look at inflammatory political sites or to search for women.

I have seen the future, and it's riots. ■

Theodore Dalrymple is a retired doctor who divides his time between France and England. His latest book is Not With a Bang but a Whimper.

East of Suez is paved with gold for some. According to the continuing investigation of fraud and corruption in Iraq's reconstruction, as much as \$125 billion has been stolen since 2003, much of it by American military officers and other officials. But because Congress only investigates the theft of U.S.-taxpayer money, the participation of former American government officials in black-market activities involving commodities in the Near East and Central Asian region is not well known.

Most federal employees, when they retire or resign, have little to offer the private sector apart from an ability to obtain lobbying access to their former colleagues and solicit government contracts and favorable legislation. Intelligence officers cannot normally influence legislation or contracting, so they often gravitate in a different direction, joining international consulting groups. The useful contacts of officers working overseas are not congressmen or Washington bureaucrats but their foreign counterparts. These are frequently intelligence or military officers, giving the Americans access to opportunities of a different kind.

Senior CIA officers involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts emerged from their experiences with Rolodexes of useful contacts among military and intelligence personnel in every country in central Asia and the Middle East, extending from Turkey in the west to Afghanistan in the east. They also got to know America's allies in Iraq from eastern Europe, particularly Poland. Some retired Agency officers have been able to exploit those contacts to launder black-market money and move misappropriated commodities across borders and into Eastern Europe.

In Kazakhstan, the only Muslim country in the late, lamented coalition of the willing, the corrupt rule of President Nursultan Nazarbayev has presented opportunities to divert the country's natural resources, particularly oil, which is sold on the European market. The proceeds go into Swiss accounts for the president, with a large commission for the implementers. In Iraq, a considerable percentage of the oil in Kirkuk is pumped off meter, meaning there is no record of production. It is diverted to trucks that run up to Turkey and on to Poland, where the same friendly intelligence officers arrange black-market sales. Former U.S. intelligence officers and some Foreign Service officers, operating out of big-name consulting firms in Washington, coordinate these highly lucrative activities.

Not surprisingly, leading neocons such as Richard Perle have also been linked to oil contracting in both Kazakhstan and Iraq.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow with the American Conservative Defense Alliance.

Bad Choice

What's the matter with Kathleen Sebelius?

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

BY NOMINATING Kansas governor Kathleen Sebelius to head the Department of Health and Human Services, the Obama administration has chosen its first battle in the culture wars. Picking a pro-choice Catholic who has been barred from receiving communion by the Church would stir headlines at any time. But Sebelius's pro-choice record is uniquely disturbing. She is a major beneficiary of the abortion industry's financial largesse and a protector of its political status. Despite her efforts to guard abortion providers from prosecution, Sebelius's confirmation hearings will probably occur at the same time that George Tiller, a notorious late-term abortionist and Sebelius patron, sits for the first post-*Roe* trial for breaking laws restricting abortion.

Sebelius's nomination has energized the pro-life movement and exposed endemic corruption within Kansas's legal system. Lance Kinzer, the head of the Kansas house judiciary committee, says, "In the Sebelius years, Kansas has been a circus on the abortion issue."

The governor portrays herself as a moderate who is "personally opposed" to abortion and cites legislation to prove the point. In 2005, she signed a law that required physicians performing abortions on girls 14 and younger to retain fetal tissue and turn it over to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation for use in potential prosecution of sex crimes against children. She credits herself for a drop in the number of abortions performed in Kansas during her two terms as governor, even though the decrease tracks national trends.

As a state legislator, however, Sebelius opposed informed-consent laws as well as measures requiring parental notification for minors obtaining abortions. As governor, she has blocked all serious attempts to regulate abortion in Kansas. Since 2005, she has vetoed two bills requiring doctors to provide medical justification for abortions of viable fetuses.

The man who principally benefited from this legislation, Dr. George Tiller, is infamous in pro-life circles. Tiller claims to have performed well over 10,000 late-term abortions and is rumored to receive nearly \$40,000 for each of these procedures. He is a major player in the Kansas Democratic Party. Through his PAC, ProKanDo, Tiller has invested nearly \$1 million in Kansas politics. He donated more than \$12,000 to Sebelius in 2002. In 2006, he cut a check for \$120,000 to the Democratic Governors Association, which in turn funneled \$200,000 to a PAC that Sebelius controlled. The antiabortion group Operation Rescue has publicized photos of Tiller partying with Sebelius in the governor's mansion, which she made available for a pro-choice fundraising auction. One of the pictures shows the governor pointing to Tiller and holding up a campaign T-shirt that reads "Sebelius ... Morrison 2006."

That "Morrison" was the pro-choice Republican district attorney of Johnson County. Sebelius recruited him to the Democratic Party and supported him in a campaign against the pro-life Phil Kline for attorney general. Kline was a natural target for Sebelius. He passed

several restrictions on abortion in the Kansas house. In 2002, he ran for attorney general to enforce them and won. Once elected, he leveled 107 criminal charges against Planned Parenthood and 30 more against George Tiller. According to Kline, they performed illegal abortions and falsified documents to cover up their crimes.

Sebelius chauffeured Morrison around the state on her campaign plane and made Kline's prosecution of abortion providers the issue. Morrison campaigned on "medical privacy" and, with the help of Tiller's ProKanDo, outspent Kline four to one to take the attorney general spot.

But instead of politely disappearing, Kline was appointed by the Johnson County GOP to serve out the remainder of Morrison's term. From there, he continued to press his cases against Tiller and Planned Parenthood.

He stepped into a minefield. The local newspapers in Topeka and Wichita portrayed him as a dirty old man obsessed with the sexual habits of Kansans. The *Kansas City Star* described him as a "theocrat." (The *Star* is hardly a credible outlet on this issue—the paper accepted a "Maggie" award from Planned Parenthood for its support of abortion.)

In taking over Morrison's vacated post, Kline inherited his chief of staff, Linda Carter. She was having an extramarital affair with Morrison at the time. According to Carter, Morrison was so zealous to prevent Kline from prosecuting Sebelius allies like Tiller that he used their relationship to pressure her to

work as a mole against her new boss. Carter eventually repented of the affair and went public. Morrison resigned in disgrace.

Having lost the shield of the attorney general's office, abortion providers found new defenders in the judiciary. When a district judge decided to move forward with a trial of Planned Parenthood after examining evidence that Kline provided, the state Supreme Court intervened. It silenced the local judge, issued a gag order on health officials, and began a series of secret hearings. Two fact-finders concurred that Kline's investigations of Planned Parenthood and Tiller were legal and reasonable, but he was put on the stand. Planned Parenthood was in effect allowed to try its own prosecutor in secret. "The entire case, from both a substantive and procedural standpoint, has been difficult to understand, it gives the appearance that things are being made up as they go along," says Kinzer.

IF SEBELIUS'S NOMINATION EXPOSES OBAMA AS SOMETHING OTHER THAN A MODERATE, IT MAKES SEN. SAM BROWNBACK SEEM COMPLETELY UNPRINCIPLED.

Attorney Caleb Stegall, an occasional *TAC* contributor who represented Kline in the hearings, remarked, "It is stunning that in this matter virtually the entire weight of the government apparatus ... has been brought directly to bear on behalf of criminal defendants to assist them in avoiding the criminal process which so many ordinary citizens are routinely put through in the day to day routine of enforcing the law. One must ask, 'Why?'"

The hearings were conducted under a rule dating back to frontier times and never used in the modern era. Planned Parenthood lawyers argued that any investigation into their client's activities placed "an undue burden" on a woman's

right to choose—an argument that would make any law restricting abortion unenforceable.

In the ruling issued last December, the majority opinion chastised Kline for non-legal offenses, such as appearing on "The O'Reilly Factor" to publicize his case and consorting with pro-life groups. Tucked into the screed, the justices also vindicated Kline on the facts of the law and evidence.

Justice Kay McFarland scolded her colleagues, writing that the ruling, "reveals that the majority is more interested in reprimanding Kline for his attitude and behavior in the course of this litigation than in remediating the failure to leave a complete set of the investigation records for the incoming Attorney General." In other words, the Supreme Court was trying Kline for his politics, little else.

"The protection of abortion in Kansas threatens many of our most fundamental and cherished rights," says Stegall.

"Political free speech is under assault and the rule of law, which restricts arbitrary and capricious acts of government, is at risk. Many who I talk to, within government and without, now fear reprisal by agents of the state should they stand up in favor of the law. And that is precisely the intended result."

Despite the chilling effect of the high court's intervention, the trial of George Tiller on 19 criminal counts will proceed on March 16 and may provide the backdrop for Sebelius's confirmation hearings. As Tiller moves through the justice system, his chief defender and political benefactor will be moving to Washington.

As head of HHS, Sebelius will be able to increase Medicaid coverage for abor-

tion and spending for stem-cell research. She could expand abortion coverage by requiring hospitals to provide that service or risk losing federal subsidies. She can incrementally implement pieces of the Obama-backed Freedom of Choice Act. Troy Newman of Operation Rescue says, "The opposition to Kathleen Sebelius is important to the pro-family movement. She is an extremist. And it gives us an opportunity to prove to the nation that Obama is an old-school radical on abortion."

If Sebelius's nomination exposes Obama as something other than a moderate, it makes Sen. Sam Brownback seem completely unprincipled. Considered to be the Senate's most outspoken pro-lifer in recent years, Brownback has supported the appointment, angering long-time allies. In public, he explained the move one way: "The president won the election and has nominated a Kansan to the cabinet." But through back channels, his aides are telling conservative outlets that it is more important to get Sebelius out of Kansas so that the Senate seat Brownback leaves in 2010 will stay in Republican hands. Just as likely, Brownback's unexpected endorsement is an attempt to build bipartisan goodwill for his race for governor and then a re-launch of his quest for the White House.

But Sebelius's appointment highlights more than the posturing of Obama and Brownback. It exposes the corrosive effect legal abortion has on the justice system. Abortion providers have come to expect that leaders like Kathleen Sebelius will protect them from adhering to even modest legal restrictions, expand their business with the government purse, and persecute their critics. For their sake and for "choice," Sebelius brought near comic corruption to Kansas. One shudders to think what she will do with a mandate to bring "hope" to healthcare. ■

Terror Begins at Home

Will the Obama years see another militia scare?

By Philip Jenkins

SINCE THE NEW DEAL, fears of terrorism and subversion have played a central role in U.S. political life. But the ways in which government and media conceive those menaces can change with astonishing speed. Such tectonic shifts usually occur because of the ideological bent of the administration in power. When a strongly liberal administration takes office, it brings with it a new rhetoric of terrorism, and new ways of understanding the phenomenon.

Based on the record of past Democratic administrations, in the near future terrorism will almost certainly be coming home. This does not necessarily mean more attacks on American soil. Rather, public perceptions of terrorism will shift away from external enemies like al-Qaeda and Hezbollah and focus on domestic movements on the Right. We will hear a great deal about threats from racist groups and right-wing paramilitaries, and such a perceived wave of terrorism will have real and pernicious effects on mainstream politics. If history is any guide, the more loudly an administration denounces enemies on the far Right, the easier it is to stigmatize its respectable and nonviolent critics.

It's difficult to understand modern American political history without appreciating the florid conspiracy theories that so often drive liberals, and by no means only among the populist grassroots. Time and again, Democratic administrations have proved all too willing to exploit conspiracy fears and incite popular panics over terrorism and extremism. While we can mock the

paranoia that drives the Left to imagine a Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy, such rhetoric can be devastatingly effective—as we may be about to rediscover.

Long before Sept. 11, 2001, America experienced repeated outbreaks of concern over terrorism. In terms of shaping liberal perceptions, the most important was that of the FDR years, when anti-government sentiment spawned a number of extremist organizations. Some were “shirt” groups, modeled on European fascists—America, too, had its Black Shirts and Silver Shirts—while the German-American Bund attracted Hitler devotees. Isolationism and anti-Semitism drew some urban Irish-Americans into the Christian Front, while the Klan experienced one of its sporadic revivals. Beyond doubt, far-Right extremism did exist, and these movements had their violent side, to the point of organizing paramilitary training. A few plotted real terrorist acts.

But the public response was utterly out of proportion to any danger these groups posed. From 1938 through 1941, the media regularly presented stories suggesting that the U.S. was about to be overwhelmed by ultra-Right fifth columnists, millions strong, intimately allied with the Axis powers. (Actual numbers of serious militants were in the low thousands at most.) Reportedly, the militant Right was armed to the teeth and plotting countless domestic terror attacks—bombings in New York and Washington, assassinations and pogroms, the wrecking of trains and munitions plants. Plotters were rumored to have high-placed

allies in the military, raising the specter of a putsch. The ensuing panic was orchestrated by newspapers and radio and reinforced by films, newsreels, and comic books. Historians characterize these years as the Brown Scare.

If the more bizarre accusations sound like the common currency of the show trials in Stalin's Russia in these very years, that is no coincidence. The main exposés of fascist conspiracy emanated from Communist Party journalists like Albert Kahn and John Spivak. (Spivak himself was an operative for the Soviet NKVD.) Charges circulated through Kahn's newsheet *The Hour* before being picked up in the liberal press. The Red agenda was straightforward in that the Brown Scare allowed the Left to discredit any opponent of radical New Deal policies. Scratch the surface of any enemy of the Left, they claimed, and you would find a fascist spy, a lyncher, a storm trooper.

Leftist scaremongering worked to the advantage of a Roosevelt White House anxious to promote U.S. intervention in the coming war. The administration supplied many of the leaks that supported the Brown Scare, through Roosevelt aides like Harold Ickes and also the FBI. In 1940, the FBI announced that it had broken what it touted as a looming coup d'état by the Christian Front that would have been accompanied by murders, bombings, and pogroms. Meanwhile, FBI mole Avedis Derounian undertook the research that would lead to his 1943 bestseller, *Under Cover*, published under the pseudonym of John Roy Carl-

son. In both cases, however, the terrorist conspiracies were much less terrifying than they initially seemed. Try as it might, the government could never connect the Christian Front plot to more than a couple of dozen activists with no access to significant weaponry. Nor did Derounian's revelations point to any serious conspiracy, and the government glaringly failed to convict national far-Right leaders on sedition charges.

However thin the underlying charges, the Brown Scare clearly helped to promote a New Deal agenda at home and interventionism overseas. For interventionists, the Terror Crisis suggested that fascist powers already were attempting to subvert America, forcing the nation to confront the foreign danger. Above all, the scare provided a powerful weapon for defaming anyone on the Right who opposed FDR's drift to war. Targets included not only isolationist senators and congressmen but also the potent antiwar organization America First, which drew support from a broad and reputable cross-section of public opinion—conservative, liberal, and socialist, Catholic and Protestant. By 1941, though, the antiwar movement was battered by allegations of fascist and anti-Semitic ties. *Under Cover* portrayed America First as an aboveground front for the most extreme and lethal paramilitary fascist groups. As so often before and since, a burgeoning antiwar movement was crippled by charges that it was covertly allied with the nation's enemies. So successful was this tarring that in popular memory, America Firsters stand alongside Nazis and Klansmen as traitors, subversives, and bigots. In terms of achieving its goals, the Brown Scare worked superbly.

Such scares have occurred twice since FDR's day—in the 1960s and again in the 1990s. So similar are these later events that we can offer a kind of historical rule: whenever a liberal administra-

tion replaces a long-established conservative predecessor, that change will give rise to right-wing populist and paramilitary movements. And within a couple of years, those movements will provide the basis for grossly exaggerated panic over domestic terrorism.

After JFK's election in 1960, the devoutly anti-Communist Minutemen took first place in liberals' demonology. As in the 1930s, the far Right was supposed to be closely tied to out-of-control military officers. Remember fictional treatments of the time like "Dr. Strangelove" and "Seven Days in May"? Once more, too, the supposed threat from far-Right extremism surfaced in mainstream politics, especially during the 1964 elections. Most political observers know that Barry Goldwater was denounced for advocating "extremism in the defense of liberty." Few know exactly what kind of extremism he was supposedly invoking. The ensuing controversy makes no sense except in the context of the John Birch Society, which was pushing the Republican Party to harder anti-Communist positions, and also the well-armed Minutemen. As in the 1930s, the extremists existed, and some hotheads contemplated violence. But once again, a yawning gulf separated the reality of the threat from the public perception.

The most recent right-wing terror crisis followed Bill Clinton's election in 1992, when citizen militias attracted hundreds of thousands of sympathizers. Media warnings about armed extremism were already widespread by the time of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, a genuine far-Right atrocity that had nothing to do with the militias. Although neo-Nazi Timothy McVeigh scorned the political and religious values of the militias, they nevertheless bore the brunt of public outrage and media denunciation. Militia numbers swiftly collapsed, leaving only a tiny core, although one would

hardly realize this from the press and television coverage of the years that followed.

Between 1995 and 2001, America suffered the Great Militia Panic, when exposés of ultra-Right violence became a media staple. For liberal press outlets, America was facing a clear and present danger from the militias, from Nazis and skinheads, and even from dissident elements within U.S. Special Forces. Liberals accused the anti-Clinton Right of providing extremists with ideological aid and comfort. An impressive outpouring of books—peaking in 1996—warned of an imminent terrorist disaster. Typical titles raised the shadow of *America's Militia Threat*, *Terrorists Among Us*, or *The Birth of Paramilitary Terrorism in the Heartland*. One book warned of the *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning*. The news media was open to the most improbable charges of right-wing atrocities. In 1996, television news shows discovered a (wholly spurious) wave of arson attacks in which white extremists were allegedly wiping out the nation's black churches.

As recently as a decade ago, "terrorism" in the American public consciousness meant, almost entirely, domestic right-wing activism. This was certainly the case in the fictional media, where filmmakers discovered to their cost that any treatment of Muslim or Middle Eastern misdeeds could provoke boycotts. How much easier, then, to choose notorious villains who lacked defense groups and antidefamation organizations. That generally meant white right-wingers. Militias, skinheads, and neo-Nazis became stock villains in the popular culture of the era. On television, countless police and detective shows dealt with ultra-Right villains, who were usually on the verge of releasing weapons of mass destruction against a decent, liberal America too naïve to realize the forces arrayed against it. The

high-water mark of fictional far-Right villainy occurred in the 1999 film "Arlington Road," in which a terrorism expert comes to suspect that his too-perfect neighbors are in fact the masterminds of a deadly fascist conspiracy. (He should have known: after all, they listen to country music.) As the film's publicity warns, "Your paranoia is real!"

Ideas have consequences, even if those ideas are dreadfully, embarrassingly wrong. In terms of American national interests, by far the worst consequence of the Militia Panic was the massive underplaying of Islamic terrorism in U.S. public discourse and the disproportionate focus on the domestic far Right. Liberal columnists scoffed knowingly at terrorism experts who warned about foreign militants like al-Qaeda, when every informed observer knew that the real menace was internal. That attitude naturally had its impact on policymakers and on intelligence agencies, who recognized just how sensitive investigations of Middle Eastern-related terror plots might be. Those overcautious attitudes go far to explaining the otherwise perplexing neglect of all the blaring alarm bells that the agencies should have heard in the lead-up to Sept. 11.

Belief in the extremist menace also had domestic political consequences. After Oklahoma City, attacks on the political Right helped re-elect President Clinton in 1996 with over 49 percent of the popular vote (up from 43 percent in 1992). When impeachment loomed two years later, it seemed only natural to rally the faithful by invoking—what else?—a "vast right-wing conspiracy." Notably, one prominent Clinton adviser in these years was Harold Ickes, son and namesake of FDR's Brown Scare hatchet man.

The prospects for a fourth round of panic in the Obama years seem excellent. Militias and rightist groups have never entirely vanished—even the Min-

uteman name survives, in the form of anti-immigration vigilantes—and they will probably enjoy a resurgence. No less probable is the over-interpretation they will receive from an administration deeply imbued with liberal conspiracy theories. The administration contains plenty of Clinton-era veterans who well recall the triumphant success of the earlier Militia Panic, and this time round, Obama's ethnicity gives added credibility to charges of racist plotting.

Law-enforcement agencies, too, have everything to gain from a terrorism panic, whether it is rooted in the ideological Left or Right. Agencies usually have wish-lists of laws they would like to see passed to expand their powers, and periods of intense concern over terrorism offer a natural opportunity to get these measures onto statute books. Liberals complain bitterly about the Patriot Act of 2001, but Democratic administrations have also used fears of terrorism and subversion to expand official powers. Sweeping federal gun-control measures passed in 1938 and 1968, during the Brown Scare and the Minuteman era. In 1996, the Anti-Terrorism Act gave federal agencies all the powers they could reasonably have demanded up until then. The existence of such a potent body of laws gives police and prosecutors a strong vested interest in applying the terrorism label as widely as possible in order to secure all possible legal advantages. If public opinion permits, they will assuredly use anti-terrorism laws against unpopular right-wing sects.

Private organizations also provide an institutional foundation for a war on domestic terror. Plenty of liberal pressure groups are only too willing to offer their services in identifying far-Right activists and painting them in the most damaging and alarming colors. Some of the most successful through the years have been the Anti-Defamation League,

the Feminist Majority Foundation, and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), with its affiliated Intelligence Project (formerly Klanwatch). While there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of their convictions, such groups would gain immensely from a new political emphasis on militias or rightist groups. If the government declares a domestic terror crisis, the media will automatically turn to the SPLC, for instance, giving that group added visibility and prestige. For the media, the SPLC and its ilk can be endlessly valuable. They supply convenient maps and lists of militias, broken down by state and region, as well as providing knowledgeable speakers to discuss militia history and ideology. This results in publicity for the group and its causes and encourages public support and donations. If a full-fledged right-wing terror network is not available, such pressure groups have every interest in hyping one into existence.

Paying proper attention to terrorist threats is laudable, whatever their source, and some right-wing extremists have through the years demonstrated their potential for violence: they need to be watched. Yet almost certainly, a renewed focus on the far Right will develop more out of an ideological slant than any reasonable perception of danger. Once again we will be dealing with a groundless social panic of the kind we have encountered so often in the past. Listening to official claims about terrorist dangers in the years to come, we need to exercise real critical skills—and never forget the lessons of history. ■

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Run From the Border

HEEDING THE ADVICE of Gen. David Petraeus, Barack Obama has committed 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan and will keep 50,000 in Iraq after U.S. combat operations end in August 2010.

But are U.S. vital interests more threatened by what happens in Anbar or Helmand than in the war raging along our southern border?

Prediction: After all U.S. troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Korea have come home, there will be a U.S. army on the Mexican border. For this is where the fate of our Republic will be decided, as the fate of Europe will be decided by the millions streaming north from the Maghreb and Middle East, sub-Sahara and South Asia.

Last year, 6,000 Mexicans died in drug-related killings in a war where the tactics are massacre, murder, kidnapping, and beheading.

President Felipe Calderon has ordered another 5,000 troops and 1,000 police to the border. Primary target: Ciudad Juarez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso.

Some 2,500 federal troops are already in Juarez, where in 2008 there were 1,600 drug-related murders. Gun battles occur every day. Nationally, 45,000 army troops and police are committed to this war that Mexico is not winning. For, according to the March 3 *Washington Times*, the Pentagon now estimates the cartels field more than 100,000 foot soldiers.

The chief of police of Juarez just resigned after a cartel threatened to kill an officer every 48 hours if he did not. To prove its seriousness, the cartel murdered four cops, including the chief's deputy. Last year, 50 police officers in Juarez were murdered.

"The decision I am taking is one of life over death," said Chief Roberto Oduna. The chief would seem to have a point. In January, his predecessor's head was

found in an ice cooler outside a police station. The mayor keeps his family in El Paso, as they have been threatened with decapitation.

The State Department declared, "Corruption throughout Mexico's public institutions remains a key impediment to curbing the power of the drug cartels." Calderon retorts that, while the murders may be committed in Mexico, the cash and guns come from the United States.

Tourism has begun to die. Beheadings in and around Acapulco have not helped. Warnings have been issued to U.S. college kids to avoid Mexico on spring break, as kidnappings for ransom are rampant.

Restaurants and bars in Juarez that catered to folks from El Paso and soldiers from Fort Bliss are shutting down.

In February, in the resort town of Cancun, a retired army general sent to create an elite anti-crime unit was kidnapped, tortured, and shot. Mexican troops raided Cancun's police headquarters and arrested the chief and dozens of his officers in connection with the murder.

Add a collapsing global economy to a losing war with drug cartels, and Mexico is at grave risk of becoming a failed state, a narco-state with a 2,000-mile border with the United States.

How does one win a drug war when millions of Americans who use recreational drugs are financing the cartels' bribing, murdering, and beheading to keep self-indulgent Americans supplied with drugs?

There are two sure ways to end this war swiftly: Milton's way and Mao's way. Mao Zedong's communists killed users and suppliers alike, as social parasites. Milton Friedman's way is to decriminalize drugs and call off the war.

When Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs in 1972, Milton, writing in *Newsweek*, objected on ethical grounds:

On ethical grounds, do we have the right to use the machinery of government to prevent an individual from becoming an alcoholic or a drug addict? For children, almost everyone would answer at least a qualified yes. But for responsible adults, I, for one, would answer no. Reason with the potential addict, yes. Tell him the consequences, yes. Pray for and with him, yes. But I believe that we have no right to use force, directly or indirectly, to prevent a fellow man from committing suicide, let alone from drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" asked Milton, answering, "No."

Americans are never going to adopt the Maoist solution. For the users of drugs are all too often classmates, colleagues, friends, even family. Indeed, our last three presidents did not deny using drugs.

Once, a Christian America outlawed and punished homosexuality, abortion, alcohol, loan-sharking, and gambling, all as criminal vice. Now, homosexuality and abortion are constitutional rights. Gambling and booze are a rich source of government revenue. And loan-sharking is done by credit-card companies, and not just the Corleones.

Will we raise the white flag in the drug war as well?

Which is the greater evil? Legalized narcotics for America's young or a failed state of 110 million on our southern border?

Some choice. Some country we've become. ■

English Lessons

The hard-fought battle against bilingual education has paid dividends for assimilation.

By Steve Sailer

I WAS VISITING a typical southern California public high school, one in which the student body is close to three-fourths Latino, when it dawned on me that virtually all the kids' hallway conversations with friends were conducted in English. Indeed, most of the students spoke without an accent. Well, to be pedantic, they had teen accents—it's practically impossible for a high-school girl to roll her eyes and exclaim "That is *so gay*" without sounding a little like Moon Unit Zappa in "Valley Girl"—but only a minority of the Hispanic students had Spanish accents.

Nor, I recalled, had I heard teachers lecturing in anything but English. I found out later that a couple of percent of the classes are conducted in Spanish for the children of parents who request it, but few do.

I realized then that in the past half decade I had barely heard any public discussion about the once contentious topic of bilingual education. It had been promoted adamantly by America's educational and political establishment from 1968, when Congress passed the first of five bilingual education acts, through to the 1990s.

I went home and read up on bilingual education. I quickly discovered the topic of teaching "Limited English Proficient" (LEP) students is buried under a bureaucratic jargon that appears to consist of literal translations from some distant language unknown to earthlings. For example, when a LEP child masters

English, he becomes a Reclassified-Fluent English Proficient (R-FEP). His R-FEP status is tabulated at the federal Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited-English-Proficient Students (OELALEAALEPS).

Eventually, I discovered that bilingual education is by no means dead. But it has clearly lost the momentum and sense of inevitability it long enjoyed. America may have dodged a bullet, a long-term threat to our national unity, because nothing divides a country more than multiple languages. In contrast, a shared language enables shared sentiments.

In the three decades when America's great and good actively promoted Spanish in the public schools, giving official blessing to a second language, it seemed plausible that our country was inflicting upon itself something that could turn into another Quebec a generation or two down the road. Or worse, a Kosovo, which was plunged into war in the 1990s by decades of unassimilated illegal immigration from Albania into a Serbian part of the republic formerly known as Yugoslavia.

And it struck me that the man who did so much to head off the dangers posed by bilingual education is a friend of mine. In fact, he's my boss: *The American Conservative's* publisher Ron Unz.

I'm admittedly biased. But a decade after the 61-39 landslide victory of Ron's initiative, Proposition 227, put bilingual education on the ropes in California,

America's forerunner state, it's time to review how the seemingly predestined triumph of bilingualism was knocked off track.

The history of educational plans in America is notoriously littered with broken dreams. Unintended consequences predominate because the reigning dogma of the education industry—the intellectual equality of all students—is wrong. This obdurate refusal on the part of everybody who is anybody in the education business to admit publicly the manifold implications of some kids being smarter than others makes it difficult to get anything done in the real world.

Thus, George W. Bush and Ted Kennedy got together in 2001 to pass the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, which mandates that by the 2013-14 school year, every student in America's public schools score on reading and math tests at the "proficient" level (roughly, a B+). This won't happen.

Yet the terrible irony about the decades wasted pushing bilingual education is that the conventional wisdom that no child need be left behind is much truer for young children learning English than for anything else in American education. That's why the otherwise zany NCLB has helped consolidate the progress initiated by Unz's pro-English initiatives.

The most popular public rationale for bilingual education—that the children of immigrants need to be taught in their

native language so that they don't fall behind academically while they spend many years learning English—sounds plausible as long as you forget how remarkably good children are at learning new languages.

Linguist Noam Chomsky's 1950s research showed that very young people have an innate language-learning ability. As he noted by e-mail, "There is no dispute about the fact that pre-puberty (in fact, much earlier) children have unusual facility in acquiring new languages."

Harvard cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, author of the bestseller *The Language Instinct*, told me, "When it comes to learning a second language, the younger the better. ... People who began to learn English at 6 ended up on average more proficient than those who began at 7, and so on." Pinker pointed to the famously thick Bavarian accent of Henry Kissinger, who arrived in America at age 15. In contrast, his one-year younger brother acquired a nearly perfect American accent. (Walter Kissinger has suggested another reason for the fraternal accent difference: "I am the Kissinger who listens.")

Judith Rich Harris, author of the *The Nurture Assumption*, pointed out, "The problem with bilingual education is that these programs create peer groups of children who do not speak English well. They don't have to learn English in order to communicate with the children they want to play with, and they don't have to learn English in order to be accepted by their classmates. So, their motivation to learn English is no different from their motivation to learn the state capitals or the multiplication tables."

One hidden reason that bilingual education supporters wanted to drag out the learning of English over many years was to keep Latinos from ever being fully adept in the language. The chief donor to the campaign against Proposition 227,

for example, was Republican Italian-American billionaire Jerry Perenchio, then owner of the giant Spanish-language Univision television network. As Perenchio evidently reasoned, bilingual education keeps Hispanics chained to his company.

Similarly, Hispanic political leaders want American-born Latinos to go through life marked by Spanish accents so that they will feel isolated from the American majority and in need of Hispanic political leaders.

Bilingual education was always widely disliked by the public—a national Zogby poll in 1998 found that 84 percent of Republicans and 72 percent of Democrats favored requiring schools to use English immersion—but the bilingual industry succeeded in branding it a civil-rights issue and intimidating most would-be opponents.

HISPANIC POLITICAL LEADERS WANT AMERICAN-BORN LATINOS TO GO THROUGH LIFE MARKED BY SPANISH ACCENTS SO THAT THEY WILL FEEL ISOLATED.

Unz, a theoretical physicist turned Silicon Valley entrepreneur, debuted in politics at age 32 by challenging incumbent California governor Pete Wilson for the GOP nomination in 1994. Wilson beat him and went on to win re-election by 15 points, but Unz garnered 34 percent of the primary vote. Since Ron may have the least stereotypically political personality I've ever come across, I'm still amazed by that percentage, which seems as unlikely as Babe Ruth winning a bronze medal at the 1928 Winter Olympics in men's figure skating.

With the help of immigrant parents tired of their kids not being taught in their adopted country's tongue, Unz's English for the Children organization put on the ballot Proposition 227, which made one year of "sheltered English immersion" instruction the default.

(Bilingual instruction was only allowed upon a parent-initiated request.) It passed easily, even winning 37 percent of Latinos and 57 percent of Asians.

Unz's Proposition 203 campaign in Arizona in 2000 showed that this was no fluke. With 29 months to learn from their California mistakes, the best that bilingual advocates could come up with for the rematch was to ignore Spanish and campaign against Prop. 203's impact on the right of Navajos and Hopis to school their children in their own languages. Native Americans didn't decide to come to the U.S.; the U.S. had decided to come to the Native Americans. This clever tactic cut Prop. 203's 50-point lead in half, but it still wound up winning 63-37.

Ron's initiatives were a rare assertion of cultural self-confidence by the American majority. Proposition 227 meant that California schools were finally told

to sell immigrants what the world wants to buy: English.

Immigrant parents understand that English is the language of money, the lingua franca of the global economy. (In Switzerland, for instance, 24 percent of the workforce speaks English on the job.) And their children have reacted positively to schools asserting the primacy of English. After all, it is the world's coolest language, the mother tongue of blockbuster movies.

When the No Child Left Behind bill came up for debate in Congress shortly after Unz's victory in Arizona, proponents of bilingual education were in disarray. Not a single member of the Hispanic Caucus voted against dumping the 1994 Bilingual Education Act (which had called for "developing the English skills ... and to the extent possible, the

— OLD AND RIGHT —

IT MAY BE that wary beasts come around to accepting the hunter's trap as a necessary concomitant of foraging for food. The presumably rational human animal has become so inured to political interventions that he cannot think of the making of a living without them. It hardly occurs to us that we might do better operating under our own steam, within the limits put upon us by nature, and without political restraints or subventions. It never enters our minds that these interventionary measures are placed in our path, like the trap, for purposes diametrically opposed to our search for a better living. We automatically accept them as necessary to that purpose.

Economics is not politics. One is a science, concerned with the immutable laws of nature that determine the production and distribution of wealth; the other is the art of ruling. One is amoral, the other is moral. Economic laws are self-operating and carry their own sanctions, while politics deals with man-made and man-manipulated conventions. As a science, economics seeks understanding of invariable principles; politics is ephemeral, its subject matter being the day-to-day relations of associated men.

The intrusion of politics into economics is simply an evidence of human ignorance or arrogance. Since the beginning of political institutions, there have been attempts to fix wages, control prices, and create capital, all resulting in failure. Such undertakings must fail because the only competence of politics is in compelling men to do what they do not want to do or to refrain from doing what they are inclined to do, and the laws of economics do not come within that scope.

The assumption that economics is subservient to politics stems from a logical fallacy. Since the state can control human behavior, and since men are always engaged in the making of a living, in which the laws of economics operate, it seems to follow that in controlling men the state can also bend these laws to its will. The reasoning is erroneous because it overlooks consequences. It is an invariable principle that men labor in order to satisfy their desires or that the motive power of production is the prospect of consumption. Hence, when the state intervenes in the economy, which it always does by way of confiscation, it hinders consumption and therefore production.

The imperviousness of economic law to political law is shown in this historic fact: in the long run every state collapses, frequently disappears altogether and becomes an archeological curio. The state, in its insatiable lust for power, increasingly intensified its encroachments on the economy of the nation, causing a consequent decline of interest in production, until the subsistence level was reached and not enough above that was produced to maintain the state in the condition to which it had been accustomed.

Preceding that event, the economy of society, on which state power rests, had deteriorated, and with that deterioration came a letdown in moral and cultural values; men "did not care." That is, society collapsed and drew the state down with it. There is no way for the state to avoid this consequence—except, of course, to abandon its interventions in the economic life of the people it controls, which its inherent avarice for power will not let it do.

—Frank Chodorov, *The Rise and Fall of Society*

native-language skills" of LEP students) in favor of a new English Language Acquisition Act as part of NCLB, in which all references to "bilingual education" and "bilingualism" as goals were stricken.

The 2001 NCLB legislation wound up muddled. For example, the law directs that by 2014 every student in the Limited English Proficient category be proficient in English, which isn't even theoretically possible. Still, NCLB's obsession with testing for progress in math and "English language arts" achievement—and penalizing school districts that fall behind—had the salutary effect of making long, drawn-out bilingual programs an expensive luxury.

Some government funding incentives have started pointing vaguely in the right direction. Consider Garfield H.S., the 99 percent Latino high school in East L.A., once home to famed calculus teacher Jaime Escalante (played by Edward James Olmos in the 1988 film "Stand and Deliver"). Back in the 2002-03 school year, before the effects of NCLB were fully felt, no students were reclassified as having become proficient in English. In other words, the Garfield administration wasn't in the mood to see students learn English. In 2006-07, though, 155 students were reclassified. This is out of 1,862 "English Learners," so progress isn't quick. Still, it's an improvement.

This de-emphasis on bilingual education hasn't solved all problems. The test-score gaps between ethnic groups remain substantial, and the huge number of illegal immigrants means that many communities are de facto Spanish-speaking. In the decade since Prop. 227, however, the country has slowly been cutting back on schools using taxpayers' money to make America's dual-language problem worse. ■

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A Match Made in Tel Aviv

Will Netanyahu and the neocons live happily ever after?

By Leon Hadar

IMAGINE THAT AFTER Boris Yeltsin was elected president of a free post-Communist Russia in 1991, the Poles, residents of a former province of the Soviet empire, elected former Communist boss Edward Gierek as their new head of state. Then suppose that, upon entering office, he called on Moscow to forget about rapprochement with the West and prepare for military confrontation.

Improbable as it seems, some version of this scenario is playing out here. After their humiliating defeat in the 2008 presidential and congressional elections, the vanquished neoconservative legions won a major political victory in one of the provinces of the American empire when the parliamentary election in Israel brought to power a veteran neocon activist. He is calling on Washington to forget about changing U.S. policy in the Middle East and prepare for a military confrontation with Iran.

Initially, the neoconservatives envisioned a grander strategy. In November 2008, Americans would elect Norman Podhoretz's favorite American politician, Rudy Giuliani, as their new president, followed by a vote in Israel in which Norman Podhoretz's favorite Israeli politician, Benjamin Netanyahu, would be chosen as the Jewish state's new prime minister.

It would have been like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire teaming in "Flying Down to Tehran" and dancing cheek to cheek in "Neocon Time." Not unlike FDR and Churchill uniting their nations in the struggle against Fascism during

World War II, Rudy and Bibi would bring their countries together to fight Islamofascism. How about a special commemorative issue of *Commentary* to celebrate the day the two tied the knot at the White House?

Rudy didn't make it. But a stand-in was ready to play the part of neocon dummy, repeating the lines ("Bomb, bomb Iran") provided by the usual suspects. They were confident that mating the American Empire with a Greater Israel remained a viable option under President McCain and—God willing!—Prime Minister Netanyahu. But then McCain lost to a man of Muslim ancestry whose middle name was "Hussein." Worse, as *Atlantic* journalist Jeffrey Goldberg fretted, he didn't seem to have it in his "kishke" or "gut" when it came to Israel. Obama was willing to withdraw from Iraq, engage Iran, and work hard to achieve an Israel-Palestine peace accord—in short, to challenge the neoconservatives' first principles.

With Mac not back and Obama in the White House—after winning the majority of American-Jewish votes—it became clear that the American groom would not be showing up for the anticipated wedding. Yet the Bush administration's last foreign-policy decision—giving Israel a green light to launch a devastating assault on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip—helped ignite ultra-nationalist and anti-Arab sentiments among the majority of Israelis. This produced a mini earthquake in Israeli politics, changing the balance of power in the Israeli Knesset from 70-50 in favor of the

center-left bloc to 65-55 for the Right, ultra-Right, and religious Right parties. Although Netanyahu's nationalist Likud Party took only second place in the election, behind the more centrist Kadima Party led by Tzipi Livni, which finished first by a miniscule margin, he was able to win the backing of all the 65 members of the right-wing bloc, including the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party and extreme Yisrael Beitenu Party of Avigdor Lieberman, ensuring that he will become the next Israeli PM.

The political and ideological love affair between Netanyahu and the neocons goes back to the Reagan presidency and the last years of the Cold War, when Bibi was serving first as Israel's representative to the United Nations and later as his country's ambassador to Washington. The first generation of neoconservative intellectuals—Richard Perle, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Elliott Abrams, Kenneth Adelman, and Max Kampelman—were occupying top foreign-policy positions in the Reagan administration. To the ruling Likud Party, the policies of the Republican Party seemed to offer Israel time to consolidate its hold on the West Bank and Gaza as it encouraged Washington to view the Arab-Israeli conflict through a Cold War lens and to identify Palestinian nationalism as an extension of Soviet-induced international terrorism. In that context, Washington could view Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands with benign neglect.

I was covering the UN for the *Jerusalem Post* in the early 1980s and

recall how Netanyahu's speeches echoed the Likud-neocon line of that time: the PLO was a Soviet-controlled terrorist organization, Israel was America's "strategic asset" in the Middle East, and the American-Israeli alliance was containing the international terrorist threat advanced by Moscow and its Palestinian and other Arab allies. "The two countries are finding themselves increasingly alone in international organizations like the United Nations," I wrote in one of my reports for the *Post*. "A visitor from Mars to the UN headquarters in 1985 would have found it difficult to decide, after listening to Ambassadors Jeane Kirkpatrick and Benjamin Netanyahu, which of the two represented the United States and which Israel."

Iran), and the PLO, which was transformed in the Likud-neocon spin from a radical left-wing to a radical Islamic terrorist group.

George H.W. Bush and his realist foreign-policy advisers didn't buy into this narrative and decided to confront the Likud government over the issue of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. That tough American approach antagonized the neocons while weakening Likud, which ended up losing the parliamentary election in 1992 to the Labor Party and its leader, Yitzchak Rabin.

Another reminder: Netanyahu, a strident opponent of the successful efforts by the Rabin-led government to reach a peace agreement with the PLO, culminating in the Oslo Process, played a major role in mobilizing Israeli opinion

By waging wars against Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the paper proposed, Israel and the U.S. could stabilize the region. But President Bill Clinton didn't sign on. Instead, he tried to slow down efforts by the Israeli prime minister to kill the peace process, which helped ignite Palestinian rage that led eventually to the second Intifadah. Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, gave a green light to the Israelis to suppress the Intifadah and went to implement the strategy proposed in "A Clean Break." No need to add a reminder about how that sad chapter ended.

Netanyahu ran this time on a platform of burying the corpse of the peace process and continuing construction of more Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Forget about negotiating a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Instead, he has been advancing a plan for an "economic peace" under which Israel, together with the Americans and the Europeans, would create an island of prosperity for the Palestinians, a Middle Eastern Hong Kong. In return, they would be persuaded to give up their aspirations for political freedom. Meanwhile, Netanyahu maintains his commitment to put an end to Iran's nuclear military program, even if military power—preferably American military power—is required to achieve that "existential goal."

Had there been no crippling financial crisis and had McCain been elected president, Netanyahu might well have been successful in integrating his Greater Israel project and plans to strike Iran into a new neoconservative strategic plan drawn up by Secretary of State Joe Lieberman and National Security Adviser Robert Kagan. But in the real world of 2009, the man occupying the White House has called for negotiations with Iran and Syria and has reiterated his commitment to revive the peace

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THE POLICIES PROMOTED BY LIKUD AND ITS NEOCON ALLIES IN WASHINGTON RESULTED IN MAJOR COSTS FOR BOTH ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES.

A reminder: the policies promoted by Likud and its neocon allies in Washington resulted in major costs for both Israel and the United States. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the Iran-Contra affair were among the harmful products, while the first Intifadah highlighted the destructive consequences of placing the Palestinian issue on the back burner.

Netanyahu returned to Israel, just as the Cold War was ending and Reagan was leaving office, to serve first as foreign minister and later as prime minister. He proved masterful in replacing the moribund Soviet threat with a new Middle Eastern bogeyman, persuading many Americans that with the Soviet Union gone, Israel could help protect U.S. interests in the Middle East against Arab nationalists (Saddam Hussein), Muslim fundamentalists (the mullahs in

against the peace process. This included incitement against Rabin—who Likud propaganda likened to Hitler—which created the conditions for his assassination by an Israeli-Jewish terrorist and eventually for Netanyahu's election as PM in 1995.

"On July 8, 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's newly elected prime minister and the leader of its right-wing Likud Party, paid a visit to the neoconservative luminary Richard Perle in Washington, D.C.," journalist Craig Unger wrote in *Vanity Fair* in March 2007. "The subject of their meeting was a policy paper that Perle and other analysts had written for an Israeli-American think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic Political Studies. Titled 'A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,' the paper contained the 'kernel of a breathtakingly radical vision for a new Middle East.'"

Victors' History

Neocons have airbrushed the Old Right out of our past.

By Paul Gottfried

SOMEONE OUGHT TO write a book called *Down the Memory Hole*. It would discuss the multifarious beliefs that American conservatives held until the second half of the 20th century but subsequently gave up without fuss or embarrassment. Conservative leaders have not only abandoned their forebears' understanding of such events as the Civil War, World War I, and the civil rights movement, they have imposed on their followers exactly opposite views. A case in point is the revisionist historiography of Larry Schweikart, coauthor—with Michael Allen—of *A Patriot's History of the United States*.

Schweikart, a regular on Fox News, takes to task "leftist" historians who disparage America's past or glorify the expansion of public administration. In the latter respect, he offers a useful antidote to the mainstream liberal history of my youth, particularly to exaggerated claims about FDR pulling us out of the Depression. Schweikart also tells the truth about such productive, non-activist presidents as Calvin Coolidge and Dwight Eisenhower, who have long been treated by left-leaning court historians as inferior to the leaders who built the welfare-warfare state. Schweikart notes the integrity of Grover Cleveland—one of our most morally upstanding but largely ignored chief executives—and dares bring up the discomfiting fact that most of those in the State Department whom Joe McCarthy deemed to be security risks were exactly that.

Yet many of the views that this patriotic historian considers far leftist are

actually those of the Old Right. And notably, war and the social upheavals associated with it are the subjects where the revisionism is most glaring. Schweikart and other historians attached to the conservative movement define patriotism as defending wars that our government involved us in—or, beyond that, affirming that America is "the greatest country that ever existed."

Presumably, if America is now the most admirable country of all time, the devastations that got us where we are must all be celebrated. American pride has come to center on praising the present, which is supposedly under siege from the anti-American Left. The problem here is that the Left has even more reason than the patriotic Right to be proud of the American present. After all, culturally and politically, the Left has created American history as we now know it—a narrative of ever greater progress toward personal and group emancipation, which culminates in our offering the fruits of democracy to the world. To question the price of this achievement in war and bloodshed is to be unpatriotic as well as politically incorrect.

Conservatives' understanding of history changed profoundly between the 1950s and the 1980s—not because of superior evidence coming to light and forcing a re-evaluation but because of new political agendas. As neoconservatives migrated from Left to Right, they brought with them what in the 1950s had been thought of as the Cold War liberal or "consensus" interpretation of history. Between the 1960s and 1980s, neoconser-

vative and Old Right views of history clashed, particularly in the vituperative disputes over Lincoln's place in the American pantheon. Willmoore Kendall, Frank Meyer, and M.E. Bradford saw Lincoln as our own Caesar, and Kendall warned of "an endless series of Abraham Lincolns ... each prepared to insist that those who oppose this or that new application of the equality standard are denying the possibility of self-government, each ultimately willing to plunge America into Civil War rather than concede his point." By contrast, Harry Jaffa, a Lincoln enthusiast, declared that views like Kendall's amounted to "a distinctive American fascism, or national socialism."

The Jaffaites prevailed. Today, hardly anyone in my heavily Republican region of Pennsylvania can imagine criticisms of Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, or FDR's prosecution of World War II as anything other than anti-American.

Among the perspectives that no longer belong to the establishment Right but that could once be found regularly in the *American Mercury*, *Human Events*, *National Review*, and other conservative publications are the following: Woodrow Wilson and his outspokenly Anglophile secretary of state, Robert Lansing, maneuvered us into World War I by treating the two belligerent sides unequally and excusing the British blockade of Germany, which was illegal under international law and starved German civilians. FDR behaved recklessly in dealing with imperial Japan in 1941, and whether he willed it or not, his actions were bound to lead to a Japanese

attack. After Pearl Harbor, the U.S., led by such liberals as FDR and California governor Earl Warren, stripped American citizens of Japanese ancestry of their property and freedom as part of an attempt to frighten Americans into submission to the central government. (Significantly, Robert Taft was the sole Senate vote against internment.) The Nuremberg trials were an example of victor's justice that had no legal basis outside of the will of the antifascist winners, including Stalin. Moreover, World War II could have ended without insisting on "unconditional surrender" from the Axis powers; dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese was unnecessary for bringing about a just peace.

Nowadays, Richard M. Weaver's characterization of Allied behavior during World War II would surely get him branded as an "unpatriotic conservative":

Our nation was treated to the spectacle of young boys fresh out of Kansas and Texas turning nonmilitary Dresden into a holocaust which is said to have taken tens of thousands of lives, pulverizing ancient shrines like Monte Cassino and Nuremberg, and bringing atomic annihilation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. ... Such things are so inimical to the foundations on which civilization is built that they cast into doubt the very possibility of recovery.

Neoconservative historiography prevailed against the Old Right because it could build on the Left's moral assessments—treating Lincoln and General Sherman as great emancipators, for example—while at the same time tapping into the patriotic, pro-military sentiments of American Republicans and Fox News-viewing conservatives. From the liberal establishment's perspective, American history's new "patriotic"

heroes—war presidents Lincoln, Wilson, FDR, and Truman—are a vast improvement over cantankerous Old Right figures like Robert LaFollette and Robert Taft.

Widespread historical illiteracy may also help explain the success of the new historiography. Selling young Republicans on myths, like Martin Luther King being a "conservative Christian," is remarkably easy. Indeed, it must be exhilarating to learn, as one of my Republican students announced in a senior seminar, that "all those people the Democrats like were really conservatives."

The neoconservative picture of our past was already so pervasive by the 1980s that even otherwise sound conservatives fell prey to it. From 1983 until 1988, Sen. Jesse Helms, whom one could not plausibly accuse of being an FDR worshipper, opposed giving even nominal redress to Japanese-Americans who had been interned during World War II. Through most of this period, Helms enjoyed the support of the onetime New Dealer Ronald Reagan, who finally gave in and signed a bill sponsored by two Japanese-American Democratic congressmen. It is a sign of historical madness that liberals in the party of FDR were able to put themselves at the head of this movement to atone for leftist, antifascist sins, while the arch-conservative Helms attacked it endlessly as "unpatriotic." Had Helms known the truth, he would have sponsored his own bill and asked Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui to disavow FDR and his radical leftist destruction of civil liberties for Japanese-American citizens in good standing.

Ironically, the older Left and the Old Right occasionally agreed in their interpretations. The socialist literary critic Edmund Wilson in *Patriotic Gore* indignantly criticized the Union side in the Civil War for devastating the American South. And one of the most prominent

critics of Woodrow Wilson was the Marxist historian William Appleman Williams, whom the antiwar Right still cites as an authority. As late as 1956, when Ted Sorenson ghostwrote *Profiles in Courage* for the soon-to-be Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, liberal Democrats could still extol figures and deeds that neoconservatives and neoliberals today would never tolerate. Sorenson included Robert A. Taft, for example, as a profile in courage for his opposition to the Nuremberg trials.

Today's academic and journalistic Left would never applaud such politically incorrect heroism—nor would movement conservatives. Except for American participation in the Cold War, the modern Left and the patriotic Right celebrate most of the same milestones on the American path to progress. Looking at Sean Wilentz's well-received *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln*, it is difficult to find critical points over which the self-described liberal Democrat and Princeton luminary and his neoconservative readers might disagree. Although Wilentz and the patriotic school might wrangle over some aspects of FDR's New Deal policies, they would see eye to eye on most things, including the Civil War, Reconstruction, Wilson's presidency, U.S. conduct in the Second World War, and the civil-rights revolution. This broad area of agreement about heroes and villains—and about how we reached the glorious present by overcoming the prejudices of the past—unites the liberal and patriotic versions of American history. This is the new consensus history, and it leaves little room for the Old Right's take on the past to get a fair hearing. ■

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Rule of Lawlessness

LESS THAN A YEAR after reversing course and backing compromise FISA legislation—which he had previously vowed to filibuster if it contained immunity for telecoms that cooperated with illegal federal surveillance—President Obama continues to demonstrate his support for expansive executive power. The cloak of national security to hide government crimes knows no party affiliation. “Is Obama Channeling Cheney?” the *Washington Independent* asked.

In *Al-Haramain v. Obama*, one of the first cases to challenge the Bush administration’s warrantless-wiretapping program, the Obama Justice Department petitioned the 9th Circuit for immediate dismissal on the grounds that proceeding would violate the president’s state secrets privilege. The opposing lawyers needed access to a classified document proving that their client was one of the program’s targets. (They had already seen the document, which was accidentally turned over in 2004, and had agreed not release it publicly.)

The court ruled against the administration. Yet Obama’s DOJ maintains that “the Court does not have independent power ... to order the Government to grant counsel access to classified information when the Executive Branch has denied them such access.”

This is not the first time that the Obama administration has fought to preserve the most outrageous claims of its predecessor. In the case of *Mohamed v. Jeppesen Dataplan*, involving the rendition and torture of five individuals, the Bush administration invoked the state secrets privilege, as it had over 20 times before. It contended that rendition itself is a state secret, though the practice has been the subject of public statements by successive CIA directors. Still, the gov-

ernment filing maintained, “The sensitivity of the information at issue in this litigation, and the serious harms that would result from its disclosure, compel the Government to assert the state secrets privilege.” The Obama administration maintains that position.

It also weighed in against Ali Al-Marri, a U.S. resident detained by the Bush administration, designated an enemy combatant, and held for the past five and a half years in a Charleston brig. The president ordered that he be transferred from military to civilian custody to face federal charges of conspiracy and providing support to terrorists. Thus his Justice Department argued that Al-Marri’s lawsuit challenging his detention without charges was “moot.” The Supreme Court agreed and dismissed the case.

The Al-Marri case sets a particularly chilling precedent, as it creates an opening to detain suspects without charges for years on end and then head off any legal challenge by filing formal charges at some point in the distant future. The executive still claims the arbitrary power to imprison indefinitely anyone it rules an enemy combatant. In some ways worse than invoking secrecy privileges to thwart legal remedies, Obama’s position on detention is the clearest example of continuity with executive abuses under the previous administration.

As new director of the CIA, Leon Panetta has made clear that there will be no prosecutions of officers involved in interrogation abuses under President Bush. Obama himself has shown no interest in criminal investigations of any members of the former administration, and he has not expressed much support for the modest “truth commission” being organized by Vermont senator Patrick Leahy. Apparently holding government officials

accountable and enforcing the rule of law do not figure in the president’s plans for transforming Washington.

As disturbing as it is, the new administration’s embrace of national-security ideology should not come as any surprise. In the Senate, Obama was a reliable supporter of the Patriot Act. The presidential heroes he reveres, Lincoln and FDR, were notorious shredders of constitutional protections under the cover of addressing national emergencies. As Andrew Bacevich has written in *The Limits of Power*:

The ideology of national security ... functions the way ideology so often does—not to divine truth or even to make sense of things, but to provide a highly elastic rationale for action. In the American context, it serves principally to legitimate the exercise of executive power. It removes constraints, conferring upon presidents and their immediate circle of advisers wide prerogatives for deciding when and how to employ that power.

It was to some extent unavoidable that someone seeking to head the executive branch would embrace the ideology that grants him the most power.

Despite small promising signs to the contrary, in the first few weeks of the new administration, terror-related transgressions against civil liberties remain, and the perpetrators are effectively beyond the rule of law. The distortions of our political system created by the so-called Long War are not going to be solved simply by changing administrations but must be eliminated at their roots, starting with our national readiness to defer to the executive whenever it invokes national security. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[The Class]

French Lessons

By Steve Sailer

“THE CLASS,” a slice-of-life drama tracking a year in an inner-city Parisian junior high school, has been greeted rapturously, winning the top prize at the Cannes film festival. The critical acclaim stems mostly from “The Class” not being Hilary Swank’s 2007 “Freedom Writers” or all those other tiresome nice-white-lady movies in which heroic teachers overcome “the soft bigotry of low expectations” and turn their charges into Nobel Laureates.

In contrast, this French film offers a refreshingly realistic depiction of the frustrations of teaching. It’s not wholly plausible—as in all school movies, there is only a single class in “The Class”—but it’s almost unique in suggesting that student quality matters.

“The Class” is based on an autobiographical novel by schoolteacher François Bégaudeau. In the manner of World War II hero Audie Murphy, who played himself in the film version of his memoir “To Hell and Back,” Bégaudeau portrays a teacher named François Marin. “The Class” could be called “To Heck and Back” because “inner city” doesn’t mean quite the same thing in Paris as it does in Detroit. The French like their cities, so the riotous public housing projects are out in the dreary Paris suburbs. The 14-year-olds in “The Class” aren’t gun-packing gangbangers, as in Hollywood movies. They’re just

mouthy adolescents, lazy, not terribly bright, and full of *ressentiment* at the dominance of elitist French culture.

Marin’s French literature class is half French and half minority, with the unrulier Muslims, black and white, absorbing most of his attention. The smartest and most respectful student is a Chinese immigrant, while the worst troublemaker is Souleymane from Mali in sub-Saharan Africa. One well-spoken lad who hopes to win admission to the elite Lycée Henri IV goes largely ignored in the turmoil caused by his less intelligent classmates. They constantly monitor whether they are being disrespected so they can get off task. Gripping about being dissed is more fun than being forced to reveal to the other kids that they can’t do the work. Marin banters with them, but he’s too genteel to thrive amid all the dominance struggles.

By his fifth year, Marin is no longer an idealist. When a naïve colleague suggests that he should assign Voltaire’s *Candide*, he demurs, “The Enlightenment will be tough for them.” Marin tries to get the class to read *The Diary of Anne Frank* instead (which, in “Freedom Writers,” turns teacher Erin Gruwell’s slum students into prodigies of literary creativity), but it mostly annoys Marin’s heavily Muslim class.

The triumph of multiculturalist ideology is less complete in France than in most other Western countries. Having successfully assimilated European immigrants by immersion in the French language, the French tend to assume that these latest newcomers must eventually wake up and appreciate the inherent superiority of French culture. In his grammatical examples illustrating the imperfect subjunctive, which is employed solely in upscale written French, Marin uses only European

names. (That’s a habit that has been drilled out of American teachers.) The students, however, subscribe to American ideas about multiculturalism. An obnoxious girl of North African descent objects to the teacher’s Eurocentric names as “Honkies, Frenchies, Frogs!”

And why do they need to learn the imperfect subjunctive, anyway? “It’s bourgeois,” the children argue, parroting generations of celebrated French leftist intellectuals, not realizing that you can’t get to be a celebrated French leftist intellectual unless you’ve mastered French grammar.

At a teacher’s meeting attended by two bored student representatives who giggle in the back row, the faculty plots to suspend Souleymane. Marin urges mercy, arguing that he isn’t bad, he has just reached his limits academically. The two students sit upright, scandalized that a teacher would suggest that any student is below average in intelligence. The next day, the girls start a brouhaha in class over this, which worsens when Marin responds using grammar too sophisticated for them to interpret correctly. In the ensuing melee, Souleymane unintentionally smacks a bystander in the eye.

After he is expelled, the classroom atmosphere improves. Still, by the end of the year, only the smart students have learned much.

“The Class” is filmed in that unattractive quasi-documentary style—claustrophobic close-ups on cheap digital video—that has become *de rigueur* for prestige films. There’s no music on the soundtrack and almost no humor. The slow “real-time” pacing effectively conveys the boredom felt by many students, but the opportunity cost is that there’s no room for an engaging plot. ■

Rated PG-13 for language.

BOOKS

[*Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1874-1908*, William Oddie, Oxford University Press, 416 pages]

Paradox Was His Doxy

By Robert Gray

AS G.K. CHESTERTON was one of the greatest 20th-century apologists for Christianity, it is only natural that he should have many keen admirers in the overwhelmingly Christian United States. For Chesterton does not merely defend his faith; in an age when so many intellectuals pique themselves on being too sophisticated for religion, he makes Christianity appear that most un-Christian thing, the natural choice of a superior mind.

It may even be that some of his writings are too brilliant. To read *Orthodoxy*, published in 1908 and the termination point of William Oddie's study, is to marvel at a virtuoso display of paradoxical argument. Yet while each separate page compels admiration and assent, the workaday reader may close the book with the feeling that he has been as much dazzled as enlightened.

Perhaps Chesterton is best taken in short doses. Notwithstanding his novels and the Father Brown stories, notwithstanding his talent for verse, he remained first and foremost a journalist, albeit one of the cleverest that ever lived. Much of his output was dictated to meet an imminent deadline. This astonishing gift for extemporizing also made Chesterton one of the greatest debaters of the age. He won not merely the admiration but, through his transparent goodness and fair-mindedness, the love of opponents such as Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells. Would that he

were living in the television age to demonstrate the almost forgotten truism that atheists and agnostics possess no monopoly on wisdom.

Recently, the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth has provoked a long litany of solemn secular worship, loaded with assumptions about the death of God. Chesterton never denied the theory of evolution; he refused, however, to see in it the ruin of religion. "Nobody," he declared, "can imagine how nothing could turn into something. Nobody can get an inch nearer to it by explaining that something could turn into something else. It is really far more logical to start by saying, 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth,' even if you only mean 'In the beginning some unthinkable power began some unthinkable process.'"

With his flair for drawing unlikely parallels, Chesterton observed that the principles of faith might be regarded in much the same light as those of evolution. Both, he observed, are hypotheses that, once tested, become a means of perception to make sense of what had previously been obscure. Modern rationalists, however, by refusing to try faith, deprive themselves of its benefits.

Oddie has written the first systematic study of the way in which Chesterton's religious thought evolved through his thirties. While affording a great deal more biographical fact than Chesterton vouchsafed in his wonderfully imaginative books on (among others) St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, Robert Browning, and Charles Dickens, Oddie also is essentially concerned with ideas. For those seeking a more conventional, though no less reverential, study of Chesterton's life as a whole, there remains Maisie Ward's biography, published in 1944.

Oddie stresses how fortunate Chesterton was in his parents and his school. His father, Edward Chesterton, a retired estate agent in Kensington, was a delightful and talented man, well qualified to inspire his two sons with enthusiasm for literature and art and eager to develop their talents. Even though

Edward Chesterton was rather more a liberal humanist than a Christian, his quirky benevolence left his son with an inextinguishable sense of wonder and fostered what GKC called "the permanent anticipation of surprise." This view of life as a glorious miracle that perpetually renews itself remained the foundation of Chesterton's religion for the remainder of his days.

At an early age, too, the boy fell upon George MacDonald's tale *The Prince and the Goblin*, a parable of faith and belief in which the evil goblins threaten every kind of harm, while none but the fairy grandmother can guarantee relief. She is accessible, however, only to those who are ready to believe in her, and can be reached only by those who follow an invisible thread.

The intuitions conferred by Chesterton's childhood might well have been destroyed by the philistinism of a conventional 19th-century public school. He was lucky enough, however, to attend St. Paul's during a period when, thanks to an exceptionally civilized headmaster, F.W. Walker, the cult of heartiness lagged well behind the promotion of intellect. Though Chesterton never bestirred himself in class, he carried off the poetry prize with a poem on St. Francis Xavier. "Six foot of genius," the headmaster told Mrs. Chesterton, "cherish him, cherish him."

At this stage, the boy's religious instincts remained resolutely undogmatic and anti-papal. He was, however, curiously attached to stories of medieval piety, and, even more curiously, given his background, deeply attracted to the Virgin Mary. In politics, though, liberalism still reigned in his mind: he was anti-monarchical, anti-clerical, and anti-imperialist. Meanwhile, Chesterton's talents and geniality had made him the center of an admiring circle. At St. Paul's he founded the Junior Debating Society and its magazine, *The Debater*, in both of which he performed with a precocity unimaginable in the 21st century.

At first, though, Chesterton seemed bent on becoming an artist rather than a writer. At the Slade School of Art, he

underwent the only psychological crisis of his life. The 1890s were the zenith of the aesthetic movement that trumpeted the philosophy of “Art for Art’s sake,” free of any moral underpinning. This was anathema to Chesterton who, with his feet very firmly on the ground, disliked even Impressionism, which seemed to him a dangerous flight from reality. It lends itself, he wrote, “to the metaphysical suggestion that things only exist as we perceive them, or that things do not exist at all.”

If he reproached Impressionism, he recoiled in loathing from the exhibitionist immoralism of Oscar Wilde, who not only insisted that there was no place for ethics in art, but implied that the principal duty in life was self-indulgence. Amateur psychologists have speculated that the ferocity of Chesterton’s reaction suggests a man in flight from his own desires. There is, however, not the least shred of evidence to support this theory. Indeed, one of Oddie’s best passages is that in which he attacks the impertinent suggestion that Chesterton’s marriage suffered from some sexual malfunction.

Chesterton did, however, divine that the fruits of unguarded hedonism are pessimism and despair. “There are folks more tired of pleasure than you are tired of pain,” he would warn in his poem “The Aristocrat.” Life remained a lark only to those who never allowed the optimism, innocence, and wonder of childhood to die.

That implied a religion. Chesterton soon discovered, though, that self-generated creeds risk degenerating into disguised forms of selfishness. “Of all conceivable forms of enlightenment,” he wrote in *Orthodoxy*, “the most horrible is the worship of the god within. ... That Jones should worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.” By the age of 30, Oddie shows, Chesterton understood that the best hope of preserving joy and optimism lay in subscription to fixed and external dogma. “Catholic doctrine and discipline may be walls,” he admitted in *Orthodoxy*, “but they are the walls of the playground. Christianity

is the only frame which has preserved the pleasure of paganism.”

Oddie, a natural communicator with an impressive mastery of the sources, relates Chesterton’s religious odyssey with fluency. Sometimes, perhaps, there is too much ease in the writing: the text contains repetitions that suggest inadequate revision. A Protestant, moreover, might be inclined to think that the story is told from too Roman a perspective. After all, Chesterton was still an Anglican when he published *Orthodoxy* in 1908 and remained one until 1922. Even after his conversion, while totally secure in his new faith, he seemed to harbor more reservations about it than trouble Oddie.

“It may be,” Chesterton wrote, “that I shall never again have such absolute assurance that [Catholic doctrine] is true as I had when I made my last effort to deny it.” As an Anglican he had taken communion infrequently, and he did not alter this practice after his conversion. Furthermore, he was never the kind of Catholic who believes either that the Church can do no wrong or that other sects and religions can do no right. While he regarded the Reformation as the most disastrous turning point in English history, he was also clear that the reform of medieval Christianity had been urgently required. Furthermore, Chesterton never wholly reconciled himself to the foreignness of Rome. “By every instinct of my being, by every tradition of my blood” he declared, “I should prefer English liberty to Latin discipline.” Equally, he showed no eagerness to visit Lourdes and no enthusiasm for the cult surrounding St. Thérèse de Lisieux. He also continued to admire the Anglican Book of Common Prayer—so much that he defined it as “the last Catholic book.”

To be fair, these are matters that lie largely outside the scope of Oddie’s present work. It is to be hoped he will address them in a succeeding volume. Until that time, however, it is possible to wonder whether Chesterton was not a more peculiar, complex, and—underneath the bluff confidence—conflicted figure than the one who, in Oddie’s

account, makes his way so clear-sightedly towards the One True Church.

Indeed, Oddie makes Chesterton’s progress seem so inevitable that we are in danger of losing sight of the mystery of religious faith. Is the capacity to believe as innate as a talent for music or sport? Is it granted as a reward for prayer and virtue? Is it, finally, an act of will? Whatever, Chesterton clearly received the gift to a supreme degree. Most people, by contrast, experience only vague and evanescent hints of the numinous, while some, such as Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, are completely bereft of the religious instinct, rather as the tone deaf might discern merely a meaningless jangle in the “St. Matthew Passion” or the “Goldberg Variations.” The tone deaf, however, would have to be crazed with arrogance if they therefore deduced that Johann Sebastian Bach was a fraud.

With Chesterton’s religious writings so difficult to rebut intellectually, modern commentators have discovered with relief that he might be taxed with anti-Semitism. This charge was recently revived by Adam Gopnik in the *New Yorker* of July 7, 2008. The accusation could more justly be made against Chesterton’s younger brother Cecil or against Hilaire Belloc. Guilt, however, cannot be established purely by association. As soon as Cecil began to speak, GKC recalled, they began to argue, and thereafter they never left off. As for Belloc, Oddie shows how limited an influence he exercised over Chesterton.

Oddie also points out that many of Chesterton’s early friends were Jewish and that persecution of the Jews aroused his fury from the beginning to the end of his life. He was, in fact, an early Zionist, who referred to the Jews as “a gifted and historic race” and “a sensitive and highly civilised people.” He wrote, “the world owes God to the Jews” and “the world’s destiny would have been distorted still more fatally if monotheism had failed in the Mosaic tradition.” Though Chesterton died in 1936, he had been one of the first Englishmen to discern the danger that Hitler

posed to German Jews, even suggesting that he would “probably die” in their defense. Measured against the anti-Semitic undercurrents of English society at that period, this appears an admirable record.

Yet Chesterton did loathe the corrupt rich, even when they were Jews. There can be no denying that his mind was warped by the Marconi scandal of 1912, in which the families of Samuel and Isaacs were implicated, and in the upshot of which his brother Cecil was found guilty of criminal libel. Goaded by a mix of family loyalty and disgust at plutocratic sharp practice, Gilbert Chesterton lost his sense of proportion and treated this smelly little saga of political crookery as though it were one of the turning points in English history. “It is the fashion to divide recent history into pre-War and post-War conditions,” he wrote in his *Autobiography* (1936). “I believe it is almost as essential to divide them into pre-Marconi and post-Marconi days.” Even that statement, though, seems rather less dotty in the light of recent banking scandals.

Chesterton’s critics also single out a passage in *The New Jerusalem* (1920), in which he insisted that Jews, being of foreign extraction, should resist adopting the trappings of English gentlemen. This barb, of course, was directed as much against English gentlemen as against Jews. Chesterton went on, though, to allow his whimsy too free a rein. Let Jews serve in any post in the land, he suggested, “but let there be one single clause bill [enacting] that every Jew should be dressed as an Arab.” It was not to be expected that this “quaint” image, as Chesterton described it, should escape the censure of *bien pensants* in this comfortable post-Holocaust era, when use of correct words has become so much more important than doing the right thing. A lifetime of benediction and brilliance, however, is not to be annulled by the occasional frivolous phrase. ■

Robert Gray is author of several books, including Cardinal Manning.

[*The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years*, Simon Morrison, Oxford University Press, 512 pages]

Back in the USSR

By R.J. Stove

UNTIL LITTLE MORE than a decade ago, Sergei Sergeievich Prokofiev seemed stuck with a reputation as one of those composers about whom almost no one wants to read. Biographies of him remained scarce, and when they did appear, they drew heavily on the same squalidly unreliable Soviet sources.

Yet Prokofiev’s name has never ceased to sell concert tickets. Nearly all pianists tackle his “Third Piano Concerto” (he wrote five altogether) and some of his nine complete piano sonatas (he left another two unfinished). His “Classical Symphony” is in almost every orchestra’s repertoire. In “Alexander Nevsky,” he produced one of the most widely revered movie scores ever written. His most ambitious operas, “The Fiery Angel” and “War and Peace,” once dismissed as unperformable, have often been revived of late. His “Romeo and Juliet” is a staple for any ballet company with the slightest claims to excellence. There can be few record collectors whose childhood musical experiences did not include “Peter and the Wolf.”

Now, at last, scholarship is catching up with public taste. Today, the composer’s youthful diaries, which prove that he ranks among the very few great musicians capable of scintillating prose, are readily accessible in English. Still more valuable is *The People’s Artist* by Simon Morrison, a Princeton music professor with awesome research skills and an equally impressive ability to synthesize his findings in mostly straightforward, if occasionally over theoretical, language. That this volume bears plaudits on its dust jacket from Richard Taruskin, the most erudite and profound

musicologist alive, indicates its exalted standards.

Among historical illiterates, there continues to fester the delusion—no doubt traceable, like so many sanctimonious legends, to Lord Acton’s influence—that equates artistic liberty with political liberty. This delusion proclaims not only that the latter phenomenon is necessary for the former, but in extreme cases, that the latter is sufficient for the former. Never mind that, more than 70 years ago, Evelyn Waugh noted, “it so happens that most of the greatest art has appeared under systems of tyranny.” Never mind, either, that the wittiest and best-known passage from the script of “The Third Man” is Orson Welles’s observation about peaceful, democratic Switzerland having produced nothing more artistically significant than the cuckoo clock. Mere facts appear unable to disperse the fantastical belief that the highest ideal of artists has invariably been to spend their entire lives gargling “Free-daaaahm!” like Mel Gibson at the climax of “Braveheart.” To those still in this fallacy’s grip, Prokofiev represents a singular embarrassment. For in him we have an expatriate artist, his genius—no milder noun is adequate—at full stretch, who suddenly chose to resettle in the world’s most murderous totalitarian state, who did so without this state’s rulers either killing him physically or even—before his last years—creatively. What gives?

Professor Morrison sheds new light on Prokofiev’s motives for going home. This reviewer, for one, had failed to appreciate the importance of a precedent to Prokofiev’s return: the 1932 decision of Maxim Gorky—whom Prokofiev knew personally—to resume Soviet residence. Pure nostalgia also played a vital role. If Solzhenitsyn begrudged every day that he dwelt in banishment from his native soil, it is scarcely surprising that Prokofiev should have felt Mother Russia tugging at his heartstrings. (Born in 1891, Prokofiev possessed a priceless advantage that Solzhenitsyn lacked: adult experience of high tsarist civilization.)

The years that Prokofiev spent in France, Germany, and the U.S., from 1918 to 1936, were predominantly irksome and seldom lucrative, except when he fulfilled Soviet commissions in absentia. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks desperately itched to have him on Russian territory. From 1925, they tried every blandishment they could think of, with Education Commissar A.V. Lunacharsky playing a decisive role in the campaign to lure Prokofiev. Several concert tours of the USSR proved highly popular—much more so, in fact, than most of his performances in the West had been—and in 1936, despite the misgivings of his wife Lina (née Codina), Prokofiev went back for good.

At first, he put a brave face on his new circumstances. Like most of us, he preferred security to autonomy. The Soviets allowed him to visit foreign lands, though his two sons remained in Moscow as hostages. During one trip he told an acquaintance, “Any govern-

ment that lets me write my music in peace, publishes everything I compose before the ink is dry, and performs every note that comes from my pen is all right with me. In Europe we all have to fish for performances, cajole conductors and theater directors; in Russia they come to me.” Much of this was mere whistling in the dark. In practice, he experienced difficulty having any of his major works per-

There’s a man behind the Kremlin
walls
All the land knows and loves him
Your joy and happiness come from
him
Stalin! That is his great name!

It is not even clear how much, if anything, Prokofiev’s abandonment of his earlier stylistic astringency owed to the Soviets’ demands. The 1930s witnessed

AGGRAVATING HIS DIFFICULTIES WAS HIS MASOCHISTIC DEVOTION TO WRITING OPERA, THE VERY GENRE THAT INSPIRED THE FIERCEST SOVIET CENSORSHIP.

formed, let alone paid for. He had timed his return atrociously—in the very year that the Moscow show trials had begun and in which Shostakovich had been declared persona non grata. Any music that might make the slightest demands on its listeners’ intellects would be howled down by the officialdom as “formalist.” That term, like its latter-day counterparts “racist,” “fascist,” and “homophobe,” derived its force as an epithet from its very meaninglessness. Being indefinable, it was unanswerable.

Few if any eminent composers can match Prokofiev’s sorry record of having major compositions repeatedly relegated to the indignity of posthumous premieres. Aggravating his difficulties was his masochistic devotion to writing opera, the very genre that inspired the fiercest Soviet censorship.

Somehow Prokofiev stayed sane, even after his friend and theatrical collaborator Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested, tortured, and shot. It is curious to discover his predilection for Christian Science, a strange creed for one as professedly cynical as he. Perhaps his consequent belief in the fundamental unreality of evil gave him a detachment, a strength of nerve, that he would not otherwise have managed against the regime’s goons. He penned surprisingly little sycophantic trash, save when obliged to set to music such loathsome words as:

a mellowing out in the styles of several hitherto abrasive composers—Paul Hindemith, Aaron Copland, Darius Milhaud—operating independently of governmental fiat.

To the limited extent that career satisfaction had any meaning among Uncle Joe’s subjects, Prokofiev enjoyed most of his artistic happiness through the war years and shortly afterward. As well as churning out agitprop soundtracks for films with names like “Partisans in the Ukrainian Steppe,” he wrote some of his finest solo piano music, one of his best symphonies (“the Fifth”), and a worthwhile ballet (“Cinderella”). He left his first wife, took up with a poet named Mira Mendelsohn, whom he later married, and in 1947 scored a great critical as well as popular success when his “Sixth Symphony” had its first rendition.

Then catastrophe: in 1948 Andrei Zhdanov targeted Prokofiev—who hadn’t properly recovered from injuries incurred in a fall three years earlier—along with Aram Khachaturian, of *Saber Dance* fame, and Shostakovich, for “formalism.” Lina was sentenced to 20 years—she served eight—in the gulag, for “espionage and betrayal of the homeland.” She never saw her ex-husband again.

Prokofiev’s formal apology to Zhdanov is painful to peruse, suggesting as it does a musically literate version of the Zinoviev-Bukharin “I am a Trotsky-Fascist wrecker” trope. Even in this extremity, though, Prokofiev avoided the griz-

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zling of Shostakovich's mea culpa, which exhibited, as Morrison puts it, "language evocative of an ill-behaved schoolchild stuck in detention, writing the same line ad infinitum on a chalkboard." (Shostakovich, Morrison further observes—in a telling epigram aimed at the moral pretensions of that composer's current mythomaniac worshippers—"had perfected the art of actively resenting, rather than actively resisting, a regime whose identity was wrapped up with his own.") A stroke in 1949, probably hastened by Zhdanov's antics, further sapped Prokofiev's powers. While he continued to compose, the results were watery compared to his earlier ebullient work.

As if to prove that his gift for bad timing stayed with him to the end, he died on the same day as Stalin: March 5, 1953. Not all his compatriots ignored the artistic loss amid the political upheaval: the sister of famous cellist Mstislav Rostropovich spent the whole day weeping. As Morrison relates, to all attempts at calming her, she responded with sobs, "protesting, after several hours of agony, 'Just leave me alone. I'm not weeping for Stalin, but Prokofiev.'"

May readers of *The People's Artist* also feel like weeping at the book's end. At times, it does not make for an easy read, partly because of its protagonist's depressing fate, partly because of its author's periodic tendency toward elaborate technical analysis without adequate notation. Transliterating eccentricity emerges now and then in Morrison's writing: "Bolshoy" rather than the conventional "Bolshoi" can at least be comprehended at a glance, but "Chaikovsky" rather than "Tchaikovsky" and "Potyomkin" rather than "Potemkin" seem foolish—we are mercifully spared the purists' demands that Prokofiev be spelt Prokof'yev. It is still a predominantly splendid tome and overdue homage to a composer of whom British critic Robert Layton rightly said, "He never lost his power to fascinate." ■

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[Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation, David Denby, Simon & Schuster, 144 pages]

Sneer Tactics

By Peter Suderman

ANYONE WHO FOLLOWS gossip blogs and webby tabloids has probably read the term "snark"—but what exactly is it? Open to any page of David Denby's new book and you're likely to find an answer. Snark is "the bad kind of invective—low, teasing, snide, condescending, knowing." It plays on racial and gender stereotypes, but "is not the same as hate speech." Snark is "parasitic, referential, insinuating." It views the world as "a series of false appearances." It is "in general, not given to hard work." It "stinks up the air without liberating any laughter." It "serves not to break down walls of loneliness and fear, but to solidify them" and "stands for nothing and lets other people make fools of themselves." It "functions as the avant-garde of resentment." "Snark is not the same as irreverence or spoof," but instead displays "zero interest in civic virtue." It is the "expression of the alienated, of the ambitious, of the dispossessed." It relies on the "exhilaration of contempt," lacks a "coherent view of life," and fails to "honor the artistically and intellectually ambitious."

"I don't want to get caught in a thicket of definitions," Denby writes early on. His slim, scolding volume is, however, obsessed with defining its subject. Yet as his repeated attempts suggest, this is a slippery task. His concept is amorphous, and he knows it. The definitional battle is essentially surrendered on the book's jacket, which says of its title, "you know it when you see it."

Reading Denby flail in search of a suitable definition for snark is as painful as watching a stage actor repeatedly forget his lines, and twice as embarrassing. For Denby is a renowned journalist and staff critic at *The New Yorker*. And yet here

he is, writing a book on a subject he can't even define.

He might have saved himself considerable anxiety if he'd gone with a simpler, more straightforward explanation: snark is any sort of needling invective that he doesn't approve of, particularly anything that criticizes his friends and political allies.

He often refers to snark as a sort of anti-politics. He complains about any commentary that he deems insufficiently reverent toward his earnest liberalism. As he sees it, snark is a crime, and with this book, he intends to name and prosecute the guilty.

A crude comment about Hillary Clinton by comic-magician and libertarian debunker Penn Jillette is snark; so, too, is a racially charged insult hurled at Barack Obama by a former College Republican. Sneering anti-Hillary blog dribble from *Weekly Standard* web editor Michael Goldfarb most certainly count, as do John McCain's sarcastic remarks about the cynical way advocates of legal abortion deploy health-of-the-mother exceptions. More often than not, Denby appears content to file snark under "mean comments made about Democrats."

Defenders of the Left, on the other hand, almost always get a pass—no matter how snide, cruel, or sharp-tongued. Keith Olbermann may use snark on occasion, Denby insists, but it is not his general mode. The faux news of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, who hurl rhetorical poisoned arrows at the Right, constitutes a valiant defense of "civic virtue."

Other examples are not political so much as tribal. Denby's long-time mentor, celebrated movie critic Pauline Kael, did not practice snark, but "criticism, blessed criticism." A full five pages are devoted to reprimanding Tom Wolfe for insufficient moral and political vision, particularly in "Radical Chic," his essay on fashionable New York liberals who party, ever so delicately, with fashionable leftist revolutionaries like the Black Panthers.

Denby grumbles that there was noth-

ing at stake for Wolfe. You might ask: What's at stake for Denby? Why, nothing less than the honor of the Manhattan's liberal-intellectual establishment.

In fairness, it should be noted that he devotes an entire chapter to *New York Times* political columnist Maureen Dowd, a liberal who makes much of the outsized rivalries, jealousies, and personalities that dominate American politics. Dowd's concern is psychological caricature rather than policy detail, and she was chiefly responsible for painting George W. Bush as a frat boy with daddy issues. Even here, however, Denby's fight is ideological. His problem with Dowd is not her wit or style, which he praises effusively. Instead, it is that she unfairly ridiculed Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, and, even worse, failed to mount a suitably strong and coherent case against George W. Bush.

This complaint gives Dowd too much credit and fundamentally misunderstands her brand of self-consciously shallow cocktail-party dish. Is Denby confused or just not paying attention? By the time he gets to charging the arch-cynics at the political gossip site *Wonkette*, the answer is both. After a derisive quote about Chelsea Clinton's education, Denby writes that the post in question "sounds like jealousy. *Wonkette* is written by young women who may have hated Chelsea's bland words as she went around the country supporting her mother's candidacy." As with Dowd, Denby seems incapable of appreciating *Wonkette*'s destroy-all-politics mission. Yet his criticism is even less effective because it is flatly wrong: the top editor on *Wonkette*'s masthead is not a young woman, but a man by the name of Ken Layne, and the post in question written by another male editor, Jim Newell.

The best point in Denby's favor is that he's attempting to defend against an onslaught of nihilism. Throughout the book, he insists that verbal sniping should be grounded in some higher purpose, something lasting and meaningful. There is a case to be made for placing a concern for virtue at the heart of

comedy and criticism. Yet a world that weeds out everything else would be insufferably idealistic.

That might be exactly what Denby wants, however. The explicitly partisan slant of his book suggests as much. All of its judgments are moral and political; Denby seems incapable of appreciating the aesthetic virtues of frivolity. *Wonkette*, for example, is wantonly cruel to nearly everyone. The breadth of its derision makes it harmless; the site hates everyone equally and practices creative vitriol as pop art. The scorn is performed for our amusement.

Denby is a professional film critic, but he is not, it seems, into anything so low-brow as amusement. What then is he after? He doesn't seem to know. His attempt to explain his purpose is worthy of a Dada manifesto:

I am not calling for a puritanism of language but, on the contrary, for a paganism of language in which every sensuous apprehension of the surfaces of life is filtered through a developed sense of how the surfaces and the interiors fit together, and what matters and what doesn't.

No doubt it would be possible to expend considerable effort trying to decipher what this means, but in the interest of "what matters and what doesn't," it seems reasonable to surmise that those words simply don't matter. Like the snarkists he claims to despise, Denby wants nothing to do with what he's for and everything to do with what he's against.

Is there a place for snark? Perhaps it is somewhat destructive, but bleak comic nihilism serves as a necessary balance to earnest utopianism. Perhaps, too, snark feeds into populist rage. But as an outlet for underclass grouching, it seems relatively harmless: better blog-posts than shotguns and pitchforks.

Denby is no populist, though. He has little concern for those outside his class. The subtitle to his book is "It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation." That's only two-thirds right. To be

more accurate, snark is ruining *his* conversation. This book is literary NIMBY-ism for the commentariat, devoted to maintaining a pristine rhetorical space for Denby, his friends, and his political allies to converse as they please. It turns out that snark doesn't really mean anything. It's just the word David Denby shouts when he wants other people to shut up. ■

Peter Suderman blogs at theamerican-scene.com.

Netanyahu

Continued from page 24

process, with America serving as honest broker. And our economic problems certainly make it difficult for Washington to join the Israelis in new military adventures in the Middle East.

Some pundits are speculating that Netanyahu will do a "Nixon goes to China," recalling that late Israeli prime minister and Likud leader Menachem Begin signed a peace agreement with Egypt. Netanyahu is going to visit China at some point—but don't expect him to go through an ideological metamorphosis.

Instead, he will probably activate his old neocon troops, led by Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and joined by Republicans on Capitol Hill. He will ask them to launch a major offensive against the "appeaser" in the White House, hoping to bring political pressure first on the Democrats on Capitol Hill and then on President Obama to demonstrate that he has it in his "kishke" when it comes to Israel. Obama could surprise him by proving that he does have it in his gut—by saying no to Netanyahu, a move that would be a blessing to both Israel and the United States. ■

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The Artist as a Kept Man

Quincy Jones, not content with having inflicted “We are the World” upon we of the world and withdrawing Peggy Lipton from circulation, has inspired a petition

campaign begging President Obama to hatch a Secretary of the Arts, presumably to oversee a U.S. Department of Culture.

The quick answer to this was provided by the painter John Sloan in 1944: “Sure, it would be fine to have a Ministry of the Fine Arts in this country. Then we’d know where the enemy is.”

We are in for at least four years of earnest middlebrow culture-vultures sucking up to the new president, whose reported tastes run from the exemplary (Marvin Gaye, Bob Dylan) to the execrable (Toni Morrison, Philip Roth) and include, as far as I can tell, not a single writer or musician from his native Hawaii. For shame, oh rootless one!

“A good writer,” said Ernest Hemingway, “will never like any government he lives under. His hand should be against it and its hand will always be against him.” His hand should not be extended state-ward reaching for alms. The Armenian-American writer and pacifist William Saroyan, who refused to shake FDR’s hand at a reception, had the right idea. So did William Faulkner, who turned down a gala at which President Kennedy was honoring Nobel Prize winners, explaining that the White House was “too far to go for dinner.”

It still is.

I wrote a good deal about government subsidy of the arts back in the early ’90s, when the National Endowment for the Arts was marinating in Andres Serrano’s urine. I did enjoy debating the subject: on my side were Faulkner, Hemingway,

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Edward Hopper, Ed Abbey, and Charles Bukowski; for the NEA were the listless ghosts of Archibald MacLeish, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Kitty Carlisle, who, to tell the truth, was the last lass to feel the lash of Thomas E. Dewey’s ‘stache.

The dirty little secret of the NEA—and the reason I fully expect the neoconservatives to embrace a Department of Culture and fill it with moles—is that it was sold as a Cold War propaganda agency. Endowment godfather Frank Thompson, the New Jersey congressman later imprisoned for his role in the Abscam sting, called it “a program of selling our culture to the uncommitted people of the world,” while President Kennedy lauded music as “part of our arsenal in the Cold War.” (Not that Kennedy went overboard for artsy stuff. After enduring the Bolshoi Ballet, he told an aide, “I don’t want my picture taken shaking hands with all those Russian fairies.”)

By some strike of lightning—probably conducted via the book-reader Laura—George W. Bush appointed one of our best poets, Dana Gioia, to chair the NEA. About halfway through his run, I was asked to serve on an NEA grants panel. What the hell. I did it, though to shut up the anarchist in my conscience muttering, “You gotta be kidding!” I donated the very modest stipend to local civic groups.

Maybe I should have taken as my model the great Gore Vidal, whom JFK appointed to the President’s Advisory

Council on the Arts. Vidal “made it a point never to attend a meeting” because “I didn’t believe that government—particularly one as philistine and corrupt as ours—should involve itself in the arts in any way. I am Darwinian in such matters: What cannot adapt dies out.”

The NEA staff impressed me. So did the other panelists. I liked them, and if we disagreed over the principle and practice of state subsidy of the arts, well ... life is short.

I requested a recorded vote on the panel’s recommendation and cast my negative on very lonely, localist, and libertarian grounds. Eight of the 15 agencies that made the final cut were based in either New York or California, confirming the enduring truth of Edward Banfield’s observation that “the real reason for the passage” of the NEA act “was, and is, to benefit ... the culture industry of New York City.”

New York senator Herbert Lehman, in arguing for art subsidies in the 1950s, looked out over the land of Chuck Berry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Eudora Welty and saw “an aesthetic dust bowl” whose aridity contrasted with Manhattan’s vibrant culture of Tin Pan Alley, *Time* magazine, and Ethel Merman. Impose MOMA on Oklahoma. After all, we are the world.

Thanks but no thanks, Quincy. A Secretary of the Arts would be to the arts as John Ashcroft, Alberto Gonzales, and Eric Holder are to justice. I’ll stick with Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Beauty will come not at the call of the legislature. ... It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men.” Or as the punks used to say, DIY. Do it yourself. ■

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